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BEAU REVEL

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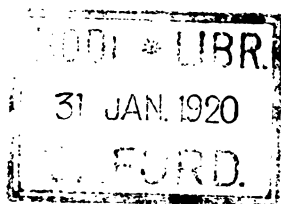
BEAU REVEL

BY

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

AUTHOR OF "THE LONE WOLF" ETC.

**LONDON
EVELEIGH NASH COMPANY
LIMITED**



TO
RICHARD HORACE HOFFMANN
M.D., Esq.



BEAU REVEL

I

“LARRY . . .”

The pensive inflection drew from Revel a quick, sidelong glance, coloured by a faintly apprehensive crinkling of eyebrows.

“J’y suis,” he murmured, and waited watchfully.

Divining the subtle tribute in this attitude, Mrs. Lathom smiled the smile of ironic introspection which is one sign of humoured vanity—a smile that lingered as she pursued, without interrupting her lazily amused review of the drifting pageant of the dance :

“Larry, how long have you been pestering me ? ”

“Pestering ? . . . Oh—making love ! ”

“Well—how long ; have you any notion ? ”

Revel answered readily, in his most matter-

of-fact manner: "Eleven months, two weeks, three days—some odd hours."

"Dear old fraud!" Hints of latent laughter played over the exquisite modulations of her voice like moonlight on running water. "Larry, I simply adore the way you play the game every minute. A woman does like a man to rattle off a glib, unblushing lie, instead of fumbling for the truth in a foggy memory. Anybody else would have said: 'Always!'—with the tremolo stop 'way out—' Long before I knew you I loved you!' And any other woman, Larry, would let you get away with it just to show appreciation of your uniqueness."

"Uniquity? Lovely word! Makes one feel caught red-handed in something agreeably scandalous."

"So, you have been caught . . . fibbing. We met here, in the Crystal Room, ten months ago to-night."

Revel nodded. "I was wondering if you'd cared enough to keep 'count of time."

"You were not; you thought I didn't remember either, and took a chance. . . . Seeing Angie Earle just now reminded me.

It was she who introduced us, the night her husband sailed for France, precisely ten months ago."

"That's a long time," Revel commented, unabashed. "How much longer do you think you can hold out?"

"That's what's troubling me. I've been so patient with you——"

"Divinely——"

"—Wondering if you'd ever ring true——"

"Alice!"

"Well, you haven't yet, you know. If you had, just once. . . ."

Incredulous and aggrieved, Revel complained: "You doubt me!"

Alice Lathom dropped the accent of badinage, though the face she showed the world—their world, that swept by on the dancing floor and hedged them about with groups of friendly folk at adjoining tables—was, like Revel's, cast in a mould of amiable engrossment with the swaying, shifting spectacle of the room.

"I mean, Larry," she pursued, "you never convince me, quite."

Under cover of business with cigarette and

match, Revel uttered "My God!" in the hollow voice of despair.

"I'll have one, too. Thanks."

Mrs. Lathom bent over the match, then renewed her gesture of impersonal amusement—sitting *en profile* to Revel, her pretty head poised with its rare suggestion of spirit and breeding, always so fetching, too often (Revel thought) so disastrous!

He continued to observe her narrowly yet covertly, the semi-diverted smile of his eyes and lips masking a power of sheer adoration.

Surely the fairest creature that ever breathed, this woman at his side, the simple dignity of her loveliness dimming every flaming, insolent face in that room whose enchanted atmosphere lent all women present intimations of comeliness beyond their fondest dreams. . . .

"Larry, have you ever stopped to think what it would mean to you, to me, to both of us, if some day I were to surprise you by saying 'yes'?"

"Have I——! Well, rather!"

"I don't believe you. I've got a vivid

notion you'd be the most disconcerted man in town."

She laughed impishly in the face of his resentment. "I've said 'no' so constantly—and meant 'no,' too, all along—that you've come to believe I'll never say anything else. Prenez garde, cher ami! I'm not to be trusted."

"No woman is. Why reduce yourself to the mean?"

"What else have you been asking me to do for ten livelong months but put myself on a par with the hundreds of women in New York who'd be glad to have an affair with you?"

Discountenanced, Revel sulked for a moment behind a veil of smoke, then rallied.

"Alice, I believe you've flirting with me."

"Why, of course I am. . . . Perhaps I'm about to succumb to your blandishments."

"No such luck."

"Don't be too sure. You may yet wake up one fine morning to find you've got a madly-in-love married woman on your hands, and the devil to pay. . . . And serve you jolly well right."

"That's a quaint way of phrasing my idea of heaven itself——"

" 'Serve you jolly well right' ? I mean it. You deserve an awful lot of trouble. You've been asking for it so long." Mrs. Lathom laughed again. "My goodness ! but you'd feel sold if I should suddenly fall in love with you—after all !"

"Try me," Revel suggested in a dangerously quiet voice.

"I don't say no. You've had your warning. Now on your head be it."

The woman sipped sparingly of her champagne, and shook her head at a mild-eyed, mannerly youngster who wandered up with a hopeful bid for a dance.

"I've promised Larry the next waltz. After that I'll be too tired."

"It ain't fair," the boy lamented. "You've danced with nobody but Revel all night. I've been watching. And his dancing is perfectly damn' awful !"

"I know, Arnold ; it hurts me more than it does you. Now do run along. Larry and I've just found out we're in love, and we want to be alone and wrangle about it."

"Not really? Oh, I say, what rotten bad luck! I do hope no complications set in."

"Larry," the woman resumed as soon as the boy was out of earshot, "you're forty-five."

Revel groaned.

"And I'm—everybody knows it,—thirty and something more."

"Nonsense! your heart is eighteen, and your face——"

"—Is only five hours old!"

"Its beauty, Alice, is born anew with every breath you draw."

Her fan of crimson ostrich feathers fell lightly upon his hand. She smiled and shook her head a little, reproving his extravagance, yet not ill pleased. Then for a while she was silent in grave contemplation of that gay ensemble of which they seemed so essentially a part—that chamber of sumptuous theatrical illusion, unreal as a cavern of painted dreams, music haunted, rumorous with low-pitched voices and sweet soft laughter, perfumed with souls of stifled flowers and sensuous breaths of scented garments, where

nightly beauty and desire resort decorously to play the dangerous farce of love in idleness.

"Babylon," Alice Lathom mused in a tone no more than audible.

"And the handwriting on the wall?"

"I am afraid to read."

"Shall I interpret for you?"

"I'm afraid to know."

"You're in an odd temper to-night. . . ."

"I know. Larry . . ." She faltered, her voice was troubled: "I don't like my husband and I do like you."

"Much?"

Revel's own voice trembled, he noticed, without any prompting.

"Too much, I'm afraid. . . ."

Revel bent his head toward hers, smiling (for the benefit of innocent bystanders) the confidential smile of one communicating a bit of scandal.

"I love you," he whispered to the fragrance of her lustrous hair.

"I know. That's what's making all the trouble, isn't it? . . . And Frank doesn't like either of us."

" Been grouching about me ? "

" A bit." One sleek white shoulder described a shadowy shrug. " Not that he suspects, really ; he jumps at any and every excuse for a scene."

" I'm so sorry. . . ."

" That's one thing in your favour. I can always count on your sympathy."

" I've been through the same mill, you know."

" But a long time ago." She was briefly thoughtful. " How long is it now, Larry, you've been—unmarried ? "

" Let's see. Dick's twenty-two. His mother quit me when he was nine."

" Why ? "

" Incompatibility's the drawing-room term, I believe."

" I thought New York law recognized only one cause for divorce."

After a moment Revel said quietly : " That is true."

" Then you can't be legally married in New York—— ? "

" There are other states——"

" Still, if you did marry and wanted to live

in New York, the first Mrs. Revel might make things unpleasant. . . . ? ”

“ She might. Never could tell what would pique her flair for cussedness.”

A lull in the music brought their hosts, the Coldicotts, back to the table. Plump, pretty Amelia Coldicott sank into her chair with an explosive puff of relief.

“ The music’s *too* lovely ! ” she declared, fanning furiously. “ One simply can’t stop. . . . But what on earth’s the matter with you two ? I never knew you to miss anything but a one-step.”

“ Larry and I are sentimental to-night,” Mrs. Lathom answered. “ We’re waiting for a waltz. . . . And this is it.”

They threaded their way through the crush of chairs and tables to the cramped oval of the best floor in town.

“ Thirteen years,” the woman murmured to his shoulder, her smiling eyes ranging the room as they swung into the throbbing measures of the dance—“ thirteen years all on your own, with nobody to answer to ! ”

“ The good are always lonesome.”

“ Rubbish ! You love your freedom.

You'd be hopelessly upset if anything happened to threaten it—if, for instance, I were to flop into your arms, crying, 'Fly with me! Give up New York and all it means to you—all for love and the world well lost!'"

"I dare you."

"I'm afraid—I mean, I would be—that is, I think I ought to be. Somehow I can't quite see Larry Revel in any other rôle but that of lover-general to all the prettiest women in town."

"Somebody's been flattering me outrageously behind my back."

"I wonder. Larry: can you fancy yourself faithful to one woman for the rest of your days?"

"Give me the right woman."

"You needn't squeeze my hand. How can I be sure I'm the right woman?"

"That's for me to say."

"I don't know. . . . How many times have you said much the same thing in thirteen years? Oh, don't try to tell me: you don't know, and I don't want to, really. But you do know it's not for nothing you're called 'Beau Revel,' and earnest friends warn

anxious husbands against you. How have you managed it, I wonder?—so much success with so little trouble, none I've ever heard of. Do tell me: I'm crazy to learn all about life!"

"It's simple enough, Alice," Revel chuckled, chiming with her whim. "When one's heart is God's little garden, women just can't help wondering what makes its innocence grow so rank: the line forms on the right. Of course—it's most discouraging—when they find out it's genuine, they go 'way bored. But thus it is that virtue earns one the fame of fortune's spoiled child."

"Larry," said the quiet voice at his shoulder, "you *are* a fraud. Must I tell you the truth about yourself?"

Again Revel's brow took on that apprehensive wrinkle.

"Every time you adopt that tone, Alice, I'm sure to hear something to my disadvantage. Let's talk about anybody else."

"I'm thinking only of you to-night. . . ."

"That's what worries me. You're a long sight too clever spontaneously, but when you take time to think, your analytic insight becomes purely diabolic."

"If you believe that, you ought to be afraid of me."

"I am, Alice—you don't know how dreadfully afraid of you I am."

"Yet you want me to give Frank the chuck, and marry you."

"Even marriage isn't too much to pay for peace of mind. Once she's married, a woman ceases to bemoan her husband's faults, and settles down to cultivate his virtues . . . when found."

"It sounds desperately fatiguing. . . ."

"It is, Alice, it is."

"I believe you're deliberately discouraging me."

"I am utterly incapable of such unselfishness."

For a mere instant the woman rested more intimately in his arms.

"You really want me very much, don't you—Larry?"

"You know . . ." Revel faltered thickly.

But the moment of yielding passed too quickly; before he could fairly grasp it, he saw that she was nodding and laughing over his shoulder.

“ The Coldicotts are madly wigwagging : they want to go. So you get a respite, Larry, you don't deserve ; another twenty-four hours—forty-eight—Heaven only knows how long—before I make up my mind. . . . ”

THE Coldicotts and the Lathoms inhabited the same Park Avenue apartment block, whereas Revel, with a mulishness which he privately feared must be symptomatic of old age, clung to his hopelessly out-of-the-world Gramercy Park address. So he found no excuse for squiring Alice farther than the curb beneath the carriage canopy.

Waving a last good-night as the Coldicott car pulled out, he settled his topper at an inimitable angle—really less an angle than a bare hint of inherent doggishness—caught his stick jauntily under an arm, thrust both hands into the pockets of his top-coat, and, quizzical humour lambent in his eyes, strolled with incontestably strutting heels over to the Avenue ; contentedly conscious of being very much in the picture of Beau Revel, and wondering what the deuce to do with the rest of the evening.

The night was still young, as nights went with Larry Revel—little after twelve, by the street clock at the corner of Forty-third—and the least inviting resort he could think of was home, where one might be sure of finding nothing but solid comfort : in Revel's esteem the loneliest hole in town since Dick, arrogating unto himself the inalienable rights of a he-bachelor with a vote, had with his father's entire approval moved to rooms of his own in the Fifties.

And to-night was no night for solitude and sober introspection, but distinctly a night to be heedlessly squandered indulging the mad exhilaration inspired by Alice Lathom's melting mood. It would be a pity, more than a pity, a sure-enough sin, to let serious consideration cloud that glamour of gladness which bound his senses like a spell of spring-time. For never (he assured himself) had he felt younger, more joyous and irresponsible . . . never since the last time.

Revel smiled secretly, in the shadow of his closely trimmed moustache. He was by way of being quite broad-minded in respect of

his personal peccadilloes. The writer chap, What's-his-name, was right, immorally right and wise, who said that a man renews his youth every time he falls in love. There was nothing like it, nothing. . . . Only, of course, like everything delectable, it wouldn't stand analysis.

Decidedly no night for thinking. . . .

Pausing on Delmonico's corner, Revel conned the list of clubs where one might conceivably while away an hour or so in decent company, neither too steady-paced nor rowdy. And of a sudden chilled by the immediate sepulchral menace of the Century, he shied and fled in a panic which wasn't wholly neutralized till, having put Forty-second Street well behind him, he was appalled to find himself in the forbidding penumbra of the Union League. In desperation, then, he scuttled off the Avenue and plunged headlong into the Brook, only to find it deserted but for Drummond Hale and the two Morleys—a disputatious group obstructing the fairway of the entrance.

“Ask Larry Revel,” Drummond exclaimed as he hove in sight. “Aint I right, Larry?”

" Monotonously, Drum. What's the trouble ? "

" Oh, Drum's in a silly wax about Wilson's going over to France. If you listen to him, he'll row all night."

" But it's perfectly apparent the man's got no real excuse for violating precedent this way. Besides, there's every reason to believe that by going out of the country he automatically forfeits the Presidency——"

" Rot ! " Roger Morley commented dispassionately.

" I'll go this far with you," Revel offered :
" I think he's ill-advised."

Roger squared combatively at him : " How so, if you please ? "

" Because distance lends enchantment to his views." Revel deprecated their grins with a solemn countenance. " No, but seriously : as long as he's three thousand miles away, he stands to Europe a shape of portentous enigma, inscrutable, cloaked in the sublime ambiguity of—oh, no end of facile phrases. At all costs, he ought to preserve the prestige of his celestial aloofness ; he should remain as remote from the Peace

Congress as he is from his country's. He should never risk revealing himself as a thing of common flesh and blood, prone to human error. He should be visible to mortals neither at home nor abroad. . . . That is where God is so wise."

Roger Morley choked and spluttered indignantly. Giggling, Drummond smote his back with affectionate violence.

"What'd I tell you?"

"Good old Larry!" Tom Morley linked his arm. "Here's our taxi. Let's go."

"Go——?" Revel inquired, hanging back.

"Round to Nelly Steele's."

Revel freed his arm with an impatient jerk.

"Don't be an ass, Larry; it's the newest dance and supper club."

"Then why in the name of ennui——!"

"To see Nelly dance, of course. Mean to say you haven't——?"

"I'm getting on in years; Nelly Steele means nothing to me—as yet."

"The freshest, sweetest, prettiest thing in town, and—heavens!—how she can dance."

"I distrust your taste in women, Tom. However . . . this once. . . ."

In the cab, more misgivings visited him :
“ I crave amusement—and you offer me the tawdry torment of a so-called club, a dance hall masquerading as a rendezvous for decent, law-abiding folk——”

“ The smartest place in town,” Drummond Hale asserted.

“ And *I* have not been there ? ”

“ Oh Lord ! ” Roger Morley groaned ;
“ stop the cab and put him out.”

“ It might be a true kindness—though I know you don’t mean it that way.” Revel took observations through the window, and saw St. Patrick’s dropping astern. “ Where is this highly respectable honk-a-tonk anyway ? ”

“ The old Sutphen stables in Fifty-sixth, near Madison. McLynn, Reed, and Wright tore out the in’ards and made it all over—perfectly stunning—everything Late Nondescript or something.”

“ Mid-Victrolian,” Drummond corrected.

“ Sounds like a house of ill shape,” Revel suggested. “ As architects, McLynn, Reed, and Wright put up striking bills. Who’s the infatuate financier ? ”

"Nelly isn't telling. But they do say she's doing it all on her own."

"Is it likely?"

"Anything is possible in New York to-day, even virtue."

"Pessimist . . ."

Tom Morley took umbrage: "Oh, dry up, Larry! Nelly Steele's all right. I know she's all right. She's—she's a darling."

"Forgive me, Tom. And tell me more."

"Mrs. Rossiter Wade stands sponsor for her."

"Then somebody ought to know who Nelly Steele is. Where does she hail from? What was she day before yesterday?"

"Never thought to ask. It's enough for me to know she's the most delightful dancer——"

"Ballroom? Or desperational?"

"Judge for yourself. We're here."

Revel's eyes perceived nothing of promise in the staid, featureless exterior of the reformed stables. A solitary wrought-iron lamp cast an uncertain light over a narrow, non-committal doorway. But a very correct doorman offered a return check, tactfully overlooking the fact that the taxi wasn't a

private car. And waltz music by an orchestra whose uncommon quality was undeniable greeted the four men as they passed through a small vestibule into a spacious and invitingly arranged lounge, where Revel and the Morleys waited while Drummond Hale registered them as his guests.

"Drummond's put us up for membership, Larry," Roger volunteered. "He'll do as much for you, if you like."

"I've got enough clubs. Besides, this sort of thing . . ."

"Oh, you'll be keen enough before you leave!"

"What's the tax?"

"Initiation two hundred and fifty—I forget the dues."

"Now I know why Nelly's name is Steele."

But influences of insidious allure were already at work, undermining his lightly supercilious pose, as Revel waited, idly reviewing the courses of the dance, where a slender barrier with provision for curtains stood between the lounge and the main room of the building.

Beneath a shallow gallery that ran round

three walls on the second storey level, was a low platform for tables set apart by sketchy frames of lattice with climbing vines. More lattice work screened walls whose colouring indicated atmospheric depths of silver, blue, and lilac-grey. Draperies in the same scheme masked the roof, streaming wide from a great high globe of iridescent glass that burned like a goblin moon, the one visible source of illumination aside from lamps like lesser moons aglow on every table.

No detail was wanting to enhance an impression of love and laughter steeped in a witchery of moonlight and music, whose wistful passion swayed as one a hundred shapes of courtliness and charm. . . .

In as many seconds Revel discovered a score of friendly faces in the throng of dancers, amiably acknowledged their smiles and nods, then in surprise and gratification saw Dick swinging by, a girl whose face was hidden resting lightly in his arms. But her hair shone like red gold against the black of the boy's shoulder, and Revel won a provoking glimpse of flawlessly modelled arms and neck, and saw Dick's head bending intimately

towards the half-averted head of his partner, his lips laughing as they murmured, before the two reversed and slipped away, melting into the harlequin swirl.

The father smiled to himself with softened eyes. For the first time he saw Dick in the act of making love, doing it rather well, too, going on appearances, deftly and effectively : the way he danced, the way Dick did most amusing and decorative things.

Ah, well ! his father's son . . .

As long as he didn't take love too seriously. . . .

The waltz was ending when Drummond Hale rejoined the party, and the maître d'hôtel led them to a table at the back of the room which Drummond had reserved by telephone.

Still Dick was unconscious of his father's presence. Revel was rather glad. It would be amusing to watch . . .

The light was fading swiftly as they settled down and exchanged greetings with acquaintances at adjoining tables. Overhead the captive moon grew dim and dull and was no more, and the ranks of little table lamps winked out, leaving a profound gloom stung

by scattered tips of cigarettes like inquisitive eyes of fire. Between lounge and dancing floor long draperies swept together with clashing rings upon a tube of brass. Strains of Chaminade sang through the scented dusk. Expectancy muted the rumour of vivacious voices. There was a stimulating hush.

A shaft of pure white light crashed down from the gallery and surprised the startled figure of a woman near the curtains.

Like one waking from a dream she stirred, smiled, swept a slow, deep courtesy to her unseen audience, then rose and waited for its fluttering applause to still.

She was any age you please between twenty and thirty, but the spirit of her was sheer Youth. Symmetrical without true slenderness, neither tall nor small, exquisitely poised, she was something for amazement and delight, at once inaccessibly ethereal and adorably of this good, rich earth. Tawny hair in captivating disarray framed a face perhaps not beautiful, but wholly winsome with its purity of colour, its lips delicately apart, its wide eyes of wonder. She wore—no matter what—dainty wisps

of chiffon over chiffon, opalescent, with a jewelled girdle and jewels glistening at her heels, in her hair, on her rarely rounded wrists.

At pause in anticipation of her cue, her gaze embraced every quarter of the room with a look of confidence yet of appeal, with a shadowy smile at once shy and trustful ; so that you felt it was for you alone in all that gathering she meant to dance, that upon your sympathy and approbation depended her dearest hopes.

The music, grown faint, found new strength, swelled into full volume ; and like a leaf caught up by the wind the girl abandoned her sweet body utterly to its sweeping drift. She did not dance so much as let herself be wafted upon pulsing tides of melody, of which she somehow seemed strangely a part, so that music and danseuse were one thing and the same, and the suave phrases of her gracious limbs were translated into waves of sound rapturous and lyrical.

There was no technique one might seize upon and praise for its perfection, but a seeming absence of it ; yet nothing was wanting, no nuance of gesture or expression,

no elfin innuendo of lifted eyebrow, drooping lashes, demure lips, or flashing smile. She danced with all that was herself because she must, because she neither could nor wished to withhold any of the joy that quickened her like wine.

Caressing the music, by it caressed, she swung with the spotlight round the spacious floor, and up it and down, again and yet again, till the ebbing waves of sound forsook her, a fluttering shape of loveliness, near by the curtains—and sudden dark drenched the place where she had shone.

The lights burned up, but Nelly Steele was gone.

For moments there was no sound, only the breathless tribute of ravished delight ; then applause like a storm, gusty, inappeasable.

The woman slipped in through the curtains, courtesied, laughed, disappeared.

They would not let her go.

For an encore she gave them something of Granados, a dance which, without aid of costume, fan, or mantilla, she none the less made supremely Spanish, yet inimitably her own.

But this time Revel's interest was divided. In the interval he had discovered Dick, at a table in the most distant corner ; and all the while the woman danced, the father saw the eyes of his boy follow her in love and longing.

The soul of Dick was in those eyes, for all the world to see.

A strange pang wrung the heart of Larry Revel, a pain whose source he did not know, an emotion whose nature he was curiously reluctant to surmise.

III

"EH?" Revel roused with an unfeigned start. "Oh—charming, charming! . . . But how long has this been going on, please?"

"Little over a week."

"Still, you'd think some thoughtful soul might've told me . . ."

"Dick might. But it seems Dick didn't."

"Wise child—knows his own father too well."

"Too well to think I'd dream of interfering with his amusements."

"I wouldn't trust you, if you were my father . . . which God forbid!"

"Thanks, Tom; that makes it unanimous."

"If you ask me, Dick's by way of taking his amusements rather seriously."

Hale's nod drew attention to the floor which, with the disappearance of the dancer, had been reinvaded by a flock of fox-trotting dilettanti.

But it was not yet so thronged that Revel found it difficult to follow Dick's eager progress toward the lounge, where Nelly Steele, returned from her dressing-room, was awaiting him.

Nor was the distance so great that one could misinterpret the liking in her smile for him, the frankness of her yielding to his arms, or the consummate sympathy with which they swung into the movement of the dance—with a harmony of thought and action significant of something more than casual acquaintance.

"Enterprising youngster, Dick."

"Uncommon."

But the paternal eye was indulgent. "Lord!" Revel said, "let the boy have his fling."

"With a red-headed girl?"

"Why not?"

"Thought you knew more about women, Larry; you ought to. The red-headed kind are apt to be embarrassingly sincere."

"Fact," Hale averred in the voice of reminiscence: "they do crowd one a bit."

"Which one was that, Drum?"

"Why—naturally—the one I married."

Almost without conscious intention Revel thrust back his chair and got up.

“ Not going, Larry ? ”

“ Sorry, old thing ; any reference to marriage always makes me restless.”

“ ‘ He smelleth the battle afar off.’ ”

“ And runs—the other way—like a white-livered hound.”

“ True for you, Drum ; it’s the secret of my success.”

“ Your success with women ? ”

“ No, dear boy—without.”

Banter as light in texture as in design ; yet its flavour lingered, inevitably colouring his mental attitude as Revel worked through the crowded floor, at the close of the fox trot, till a turn of chance, not altogether uninvited, brought him face to face with Dick and Nelly Steele.

“ Why, Dad ! ” There wasn’t a shadow of constraint in Dick’s hail, but the never-failing accent of pleasure which was one of the things that made their relationship so unusual, as between father and son, and so gratifying. “ Nelly, this is the best friend I’ve got. . . . ”

The girl had clear, straightforward eyes, and a manner to match ; her hand was firm and cool.

" I'm so glad, Mr. Revel. Dick talks so much about you. . . . "

" Lucky I trained the beggar to be thrifty with the truth. "

" You don't think he's told me the truth about you ? "

" Heaven forfend ! I hope he doesn't know it. "

" We're going to have a bite to eat, Dad. Won't you—— ? "

" Do, Mr. Revel. "

" I've had one supper already and . . . Tell you what : I'll stop for just one more drink. "

Across the room Revel espied the sardonic eye of Drummond Hale, and waved a hand of gay deprecation.

At their table they found Rossiter Wade 2nd, only son of that Mrs. Wade whose formidable social influences were said to have been mobilized in support of this enterprise of Nelly Steele's, with Mrs. Benzoni—" Queenie Palmer " of local stage fame till

marriage gave her that foothold from which, with an ingenuity and grit so common to the women of America, she had fought her way into the inner circle ; a cheerful body, clever enough to be unpretentious, to make no bones about her beginnings, to turn to comic account the native shortcomings responsible for her infrequent lapses, and always well groomed and good to look at.

Perceiving Revel, she uttered a small squeal of exaggerated delight.

" Larry ! I've been praying for something nice to happen. Sit right down here and make love to me. Ross and Dick are mad about Nelly Steele, and I've been neglected all evening, and I'm bored, bored silly."

" Disappointed in Dick. As for Ross—why don't you speak to him about it ? "

" I have, but he's reduced to imbecility every time he sees Nelly dance."

To Revel's huge amusement Wade coloured. He was a horsey sort, rangy, pink, inarticulate—a fault which earned him the reputation of reserve—with sullen eyes. Apparently a hopeless waster, content to remain dependent upon his mother, somewhere in

his background lurked an impossible wife. Revel's memory wasn't quite clear, whether the break had been legal or informal ; but in either event it had been successful : the woman was never visible.

" Don't blame me, do you, Queenie ? " Wade muttered sheepishly.

" No-o—but that doesn't keep me from being humanly jealous. No, Ross ; I'm fed up and cross ; go and dance with Nelly and leave me to gossip with Larry. He won't neglect me. He never neglects any woman. Do you, Larry ? "

" Sometimes," Revel confessed modestly—" by request."

Wade and the Steele girl romped off to the row of a one-step. Dick, openly disgruntled, hung in the wind. Mrs. Benzoni gulped half a glass of champagne and put out a hand to Revel.

" Cigarette, please, Larry. And Dick—do find somebody else to dance with. That's a dear boy. Your father and I want to talk secrets."

" In that case, this is no place for pure-minded youth. I'm off. Thanks for the tip."

Dick rose, searched the room for a possible partner, pointed gracefully, and darted away.

"Nice kid," said Queenie, elbows on the table, cigarette clipped between her admirably delineated lips ; "pity he's yours."

"Why ?"

"Because, the way he's going, he'll carry on the tradition of Beau Revel, and turn out to be as worthless as yourself, Larry. Not that I don't love you to death just as you are ; but I'm rotten anyway ; and the boy's got good stuff in him, too good to be thrown away."

"How so ?"

"Oh, on this sort of thing . . . the futile way we live . . ."

"H'm !"—Revel's grunt indicated relief—"thought you meant Nelly Steele."

"What about her ?" Queenie demanded sharply.

"Dick seems pretty far gone. . . ."

"Don't worry. Nelly's head is perfectly level. Besides, she's years older."

"Many ?"

"Oh, three or four—which, of course, is

equivalent to much more, even if Dick is amazingly grown up for his years."

"Tell me about the girl."

Queenie inclined her head sideways and studied Revel suspiciously through a veil of smoke. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything that ain't obvious. I can see for myself she's young, charming, and real as to hair and colouring. But how about her pedigree?"

Queenie removed her cigarette and inspected its ash intently. "Larry," she said: "you've known me a long time, and you always were nice to me, 'specially at first, when the going was rough. So I'm fond of you. Not only that, but I'm a natural born cat, and in a perfectly fiendish temper to-night besides. If there was anything to be said to the discredit of Nelly Steele, I'd say it out of affection and devilment combined. But there isn't."

"Known her long?"

"Years. She comes of stage people. Used to dance alone in the Dillingham shows under the name of Veronique. Then she hitched up in a vaudeville act with a bird

named Phyfe, but couldn't stick it ; he was no good *any* way. When she wanted to try this stunt, I got Mrs. Wade interested in her. . . . Nelly's right as rain. Some day she'll make some man a good husband."

" You think that possible ? "

Queenie nodded : " In spite of my luck, yes—if you catch the right man before he's spoiled ; a man like Dick to-day."

" ' In spite of your luck ' ? "

" Um-hm." The woman hesitated, then in abrupt passion ground out the fire of her cigarette in a crystal tray. " Oh, *I* don't know. Everything seems such a mess. . . . Larry ; tell me what to do. Benzoni's playing the giddy goat about Nora Nettleton, and . . . It just makes me sick. I don't know whether to go on pretending I'm a blind ninny, or get a legal separation."

" Separation ? Why not divorce ? "

" No, thanks ever so : if I divorced Benzoni, I could marry again. And once is plenty. Marriage is no good for the likes of us, anyway. Only domestic animals ought to marry."

" Only domestic animals do."

" I know—asses. It takes an ass to believe

itself sufficiently domesticated to like double harness. Pity is, so few of us are. Marriage . . . it's the dream of half a woman's lifetime, the nightmare of the other half."

"Marriage," Revel propounded, oracularly, "is merely mirage mis-spelt."

"But why must it always be so, Larry?"

"Look around you for your answer."

"I don't get you. . . ."

"Oh, this sort of thing: what is it? Another illustration of our proud motto, 'It's never too late to spend': the most exclusive night club in town—that is to say, the most expensive; one more phase of a saturnalia of spending that puts history to the blush, and is the breath of life to us—to you, to me, to our lot altogether."

"What's that got to do . . . Why shouldn't we throw money away when we've got more than we know how to spend?"

"No reason on earth, so long as it satisfies our highest aspirations—which it does. Wasting money is only one form of extravagance, another symptom of the disease that's cankering at the heart of the whole body of society—our sort of society, I'm talking

about. We're bred to extravagance ; all our training teaches us there's no price too great to pay for what we want : the higher the cost, the more complete the sense of gratification—possession. We all want love, and we know it can be bought, so we pay the highest imaginable price—marriage ; and because of that supreme extravagance, we flatter ourselves we've purchased a treasure rust and moth cannot corrupt or thieves break in to steal. Too often we wake up to find we've been rooked like fun. Even marriage, Queenie, can't buy love."

" Nothing can buy love——"

" Oh yes, it can : love can buy love ; but nothing else, nothing less."

" Since when has Larry Revel set up for a moralist ? "

Revel grinned and pretended to consult his watch : " Ninety seconds ago—by invitation—yours."

" Mine ? I only—innocently—asked for a word of friendly advice."

" I'm too confirmed a spendthrift to fob you off with one word, Queenie ; you shall have hundreds."

" Oh, I'm game—even if you aren't telling me how to get Benzoni away from that——"

" I'm leading up to it, breaking it to you gently, Queenie. Look here: let's have the truth. Do you love Benzoni? "

" Why, I suppose . . ." the woman faltered, in a stare. " I don't know."

" Did you ever? "

" Of course—at first."

" Honestly? "

" Well, I thought so honestly enough, then."

" But you didn't—and neither did he. You each had a hankering for what the other had: Benzoni for your beauty, you for what marriage to him would mean, what you've got out of it, including immunity from being cussed out by a stage manager. And each believed and told the other it was love. Now . . . How long have you been married? Ten years——? "

" Seven."

" Long enough at all events for you to have learned to like each other."

" But we do. I'm as fond as I can be of Benzoni. That's why I'm so furious when I

think of his making such a silly show of himself."

"And he's fond of you the same way. But—Queenie—think how wearing it would be if he were any fonder."

A begrudged twinkle lightened the mutinous eyes above the rim of Queenie's glass.

"Something in that, perhaps. . . ."

"You don't really want to win him all the way back."

"I want"—the eyes clouded again—"to prevent his letting that heartless chit see what a ridiculous old fool he can be."

"As I thought : you don't relish Benzoni's making you ridiculous by making a private, or more or less public, exhibition of his faults—which you married and have done your best to cover ever since. It's just sensitive vanity on your part, not jealousy in the true sense."

"Jealous? Of that—thing! I should hope not!"

"There you are. Now : how old is Benzoni?"

"Forty."

"The dangerous age in man, when he looks

back on a record of mistakes and wasted opportunity to be naughty, and forward to 'the trap upon the Pit.' He can see no profit in denying himself, won't till he learns self-control through punishment self-inflicted. To-day Benzoni's got no more self-control than you have or I. You can't stop him by pointing out his foolishness ; that will only confirm him in it, make him feel no end of a dog. Men of middle age glory in their follies : they like to advertise 'em ; one regular, glaring, red-blooded indiscretion, *they* think, puts them back on a par with the Youth they squandered being prudent. It's their strong points, the wisdom and stability that is the fruit of years, they're ashamed of and try to hide."

" Then what am I to do ? "

" One of two things : pack up and leave without notice or——"

" But isn't that just what Benzoni wants, his freedom ? "

" It's probably what he thinks he wants, now, when the initiative is all with him, when he's full of the astounding discovery that he can do without you. Of course, it

never enters his head that you could possibly worry along without him, that to lose him wouldn't be a crushing blow. But if you strike first, wounded vanity'll bring him round like a shot. He'll camp on your doorstep, wherever you put up, and howl like sin about his injuries, and if you show the least sign of relenting, he'll come in and lick your hand, and crawl under the table, and be a perfectly good dog—till the next time."

"Till the next time? Then that's no cure."

"I don't say it is, or advocate your leaving him. But it's one way. The other is to sit tight and smile cynically. Marriage is Nora Nettleton's game, the price she'll exact. You may have to divorce Benzoni—in which case you'll have your freedom and a tidy bit of property, to say nothing of alimony *and* the right on your side. But the chances are he'll stick at matrimony, and Nora will hand him his passports, and he'll be frightfully sick about it and cringe home to hide his hurts. In which case you'll have the whip hand, be more than ever in the right, able to salve your wounded vanity by acting, even if

you're decent enough not to say, ' I told you so '—and the cure will be lasting."

Observing the nearness of Wade and Nelly Steele, returning from their dance, Revel continued smoothly: " Daresay you are right. Perhaps matrimony would be good for me."

" You ! " Wade uttered explosively, dropping thunderstruck into his chair.

" Don't pay any attention to him," Queenie counselled. " That's Larry's stock remark when caught talking about things he oughtn't to."

" But quite seriously," Revel insisted with a straight face, " I can't make up my mind whether or not I ought. . . . I'm getting on, you know, to that stage when man begins to appreciate that marriage has its points, aside from its psychological value as a delightful if somewhat hazardous adventure ; that it can, in short, attain the sane dignity of a business arrangement—such as engaging for life a competent and agreeable house-keeper for a country home in the windy wastes of Westchester, where one can spend one's knickerbockered years as landed gentry,

sowing tame oats, intensively cultivating uninteresting neighbours, breeding Fords and dogs, and . . . every night, from the veranda, gazing wistfully into the south, at the glow in the sky that marks the spot where New York burns and pulses, worldly and wicked but—alive ! ”

I V

IT was three o'clock or thereabouts when Revel tumbled into bed, thoroughly tired and thoroughly content with the figure he had cut throughout what wore in retrospect the complexion of a rather crowded but most satisfactory and on the whole edifying night.

Drowsily he reviewed the several pleasing passages in the composition of its pleasing completeness : that talk with Alice Lathom, so invigorating in its promise . . . the discovery of a danseuse as bewitching as a smile of Spring . . . the assurance that Dick's affections were not dangerously placed, since the young woman, however fascinating, was after all only a professional dancing girl . . . the opportunity fortune had vouchsafed him to hear the record of another's woes and air his views on life, always a most refreshing pastime. . . .

His mental processes began to lose coherence, but remained uneasily aware of a claim upon them, ignored but importunate, the question of that singular sensation of pain he had experienced on detecting the nature of his son's attitude toward Nelly Steele, a sensation mysteriously and profoundly disturbing . . . elusive . . .

Consciousness languished in pervading wonder as Revel perceived, bending over him, the likeness of Alice Lathom, a vision benign with intimations of infinite beauty . . .

But oddly enough he came awake late the next morning with a mind preoccupied with memories of Nelly Steele ; yet, on second thought, the phenomenon seemed so comprehensible that it gave him no concern. He must have been a dull clod indeed to entertain no reminiscence of pleasure in the charm of Nelly's dancing. Even the most exacting of infatuations could scarcely excuse such insensibility : as well require that a man, because he is in love, shall be numb to the music of broken waters, the pathos of autumnal twilight, the fragrance of violets.

His thoughts were quick and warm with premonitions of success to crown his patient wooing of Alice Lathom. Even though he must wait till the courts could rid her of her unspeakable husband, even though he must renounce his prejudice against marriage, his reward seemed certain, the consummation of an absorbing passion which (he promised himself) would prove to be the last, the greatest, the one enduring love of all.

He arrived an hour late at his offices in the Equitable Building; but that was nothing so extraordinary as to cause comment on the part of the small but well-selected staff that did most of his work for him. Revel had a habit of according rather cavalier attention to business. He was fond of saying that any business demanding more than two hours' care a day was organized in a most unbusinesslike way. And though he commonly spent more time than that at his desk each day, it remained true that his hours of actual application seldom were more than two. Revel disposed of most of his private correspondence at the

office, and used the telephone as much in the ordering of his amusements as in the pursuit of his profession. The very comfortable circumstances to which he had been born, together with much native acumen and a faculty of clear and ready analytic thinking, rendered more strenuous exertions as a rule unnecessary for the conservation of his own fortune or the interests of his clients.

To-day he accomplished rather less than usual, spent far more time than was customary with him idling in a tilted chair, his back to the desk, hands clasped behind his head, abstracted gaze astray in the spreading panorama of New York Harbour commanded by his eighteenth-storey window, and comprehending nothing of it whatever ; for the most part visioning a future wherein Laurence Revel, Esq., Beau Revel no more, paced sedately, a very much married man, looking neither to the right nor to the left of the way but at the wish of the wholly adorable woman at his side, Alice his wife, gentle and wise and kind. . . .

And more than once he roused from these

preoccupations with a humorously wrinkled nose of disconcertion. However enchanting the prospect when it comprehended Alice as his possession, it was to a degree sobering when it included himself as hers. After thirteen years of untrammelled ranging, it was questionable how gracefully he would take to the curb and fenced home pastures.

As a matter of fact, he conceded, if the truth must be told without reserve, he couldn't quite see himself . . .

Yet he was in for it, in too deeply for self-extrication without broken faith and a shamed face.

That was the devil of it, this business of falling in love : if the woman was any way worth while, love and marriage were invariably synonymous to her ; whereas any fool knew that they were not even remotely related. And this in spite of whatsoever experience the woman might have had—however harrowing, however disenchanting. . . .

Not that Revel wanted Alice to delay her decision ; not that continuation of her present life with Frank was anything but

inconceivably hideous in his understanding, a thought intolerable; not that he was loath to sacrifice everything, his prized independence first of all, to make her happy. . . . But could he? Was it in him so to change his nature, his instincts, and his habits? Could he slough so readily the indurated husk of Beau Revel?

For he must. Nothing else was thinkable. Even if he could ever bring himself to countenance the thought of disloyalty, it would be impossible to deceive Alice. She was too clever, too clear of vision, too thoroughly mondaine and learned in the ways of man. Even now she nursed no illusions about him to whose care she contemplated entrusting her happiness should she decide to divorce her husband. She knew, none better, his record, his merits, his lacks. . . . Cleverest woman he had ever known—ever would—and the dearest!

In view of the nature of these reflections, it was surprising, and had Revel stopped to consider he might have found it disquieting, how frequently the grave web of reverie was lightened by flashing thoughts of Nelly Steele,

luminous memories of the suave weavings of her sweet young body through the murk of the dancing-room, a wraith of beauty tracing evanescent shapes of magic as bland and seemingly effortless as a swallow's flight.

After one such visitation Revel swung abruptly to the telephone, called up Drummond Hale, and, suffering his raillery without resentment, requested his good offices in the matter of securing early election to membership in the Club de Danse—as, he learned, the place was officially known.

Then he got Dick on the wire and asked him to drop over to the Bankers' Club for luncheon. But Dick couldn't ; it was turning out to be an unexpectedly heavy day on the Exchange, and already the brokerage firm with which Dick's young fortunes were associated was snowed under with buying and selling orders.

It appeared further that Dick was booked up for dinner that evening, and for luncheon the next day as well, a Saturday providing a free afternoon which, Dick casually stated, he planned to devote to a little motor run to some undesignated point out of town.

Revel hung up with the impression that Dick's indefiniteness about names and places had been possibly a shade elaborate. And when one remembered that Dick's car had a neat little coupé body, comfortably seating two, accommodating three at a pinch, and that Dick was too considerate to make a guest uncomfortable . . .

A notion began to take form that it might be well to see something more of Nelly Steele—outside of her professional environment, if it could be managed.

As it fell out, Revel dropped in for tea at Angela Earle's Macdougall Alley studio that same afternoon.

He nerved himself against the ordeal not through any true perversity or humour or gluttony for punishment, but simply because, his efforts to get in touch with Alice by telephone having assayed blank failure, he rather hoped to find her there. She had a kind heart, an enduring temper, unfailing fidelity to her friends: so she sometimes poured for Angela on those unspeakable Fridays of hers. But after a peering tour of the crowded, clamorous rooms, bleakly

lighted, over adorned, and smelling abominably of turpentine, minor poetry, and Bolshevik cigarettes, Revel addressed himself bluntly to Angela, only to elicit fluttering noises to the effect that she *really* hadn't seen *dear* Alice for *ages*, couldn't imagine *what* had become of her, and *had* he met . . .

Aware that Angela was only half conscious of his identity and too distraught to notice whether he was rude or not, Revel went from her, at this juncture, and was working his way by brute force and cajolery toward the door when an eddy in the crush swung him bodily off his course into a comparatively quiet backwater, where he paused to rest his poor feet, recover his breath, and appraise damages.

It seemed, vivid impressions to the contrary notwithstanding, that no buttons were missing. His collar and tie, too, apparently needed no more than minor readjustment. And his trodden toes were betraying premonitory symptoms of renewing relations with his circulatory system when he became conscious of the amused regard of a distinctly personable young person.

Without committing the impertinence of a direct stare, he perceived that she was, at least for the time being, unattended; and acquainted himself with an effect of plum-coloured tailleur and blue fox furs, blue-grey eyes, translucent skin, and hair that gleamed like burnished copper beneath a smart little fur toque: a satisfying scheme well carried by a straight young body of confident yet unpretentious poise.

It was too bad, he thought, he didn't know her.

Persuaded that he ought to—must—he looked again, this time without dissembling his hopeful interest.

Nelly Steele's eyes laughed response to his dawning look of surprise and recognition. She made a slight gesture of fun with hands full of chinaware.

“ Good afternoon, Mr. Revel ! ”

“ Miss Steele ! Let me take those annoying things.”

She surrendered willingly the teacup, saucer, spoon, small plate, and napkin. Revel looked round for some place to dispose of them, and found that they were hemmed

into a corner with no window-sill or table handy, nothing but a long-suffering divan on which assorted gossips were perched shoulder to shoulder, like sparrows on a telegraph wire, chattering as volubly.

The girl laughed quietly : " The penalty of being gallant . . . "

With a muttered " Pardon ! " Revel stooped and thrust the collection of crockery under the divan, between two pairs of indifferent feet.

" You do know your way about, don't you ? " the girl observed.

" I've been here before, you see."

" One would never think it of you. . . . "

" Oh, I come rather frequently, for the moral discipline. It's good for the soul to be patronized ever so often by the Villagers."

" You have the true perspective, Mr. Revel."

Humour enriched her voice, he remarked, like flakes of gold in eau de vie de Dantzick.

" You've noticed it, too, how winningly Angela's protégés unbend ? "

" Indeed. . . . I've just had a *vers libertine* confer upon me the distinction of talking to me as if I were a moral peer."

“ You were appreciative, I hope.”

“ I don't know ; perhaps I was a bit gauche in my embarrassment. He left me abruptly, with parting looks of pity and pain.”

“ That's the trouble. We eccentric outsiders are so lamentably uninstructed in the rockbound conventionalities of these good people, we can hardly hope to escape shocking them. And it hurts them so . . . one sees that, though they do try their best to hide it and to make allowances for our want of training.”

Revel wagged a melancholy head. “ A great pity . . . ”

“ What is ? ”

He looked sadly into her dancing eyes. “ The ruthless processes of time : I remember so well the days when Bohemia knew no laws, when the natives did about as they pleased and had no need to fear the finger of scorn if they insisted on daily baths, wearing becoming frocks, and the hair unbobbed, and being seen above Fourteenth Street now and then.”

Reckoning with the craftiness of a master strategist that he had exhausted the pos-

sibilities of this vein, he abandoned it forthwith.

“ Are you alone ? ”

“ Very much—saving your presence. Mrs. Wade brought me, but had to run on to keep some appointment or other. I told her not to bother to call back, I’d go home in a bus. But I really don’t quite know how to get out through this mob. Is it late ? ”

“ Almost six.”

“ And I promised Dick I’d be dressed and waiting at seven ! He’s going to give me dinner and then we hope to see part of a play.”

“ Part of—— ? ”

“ I have to be at the Club at half-past ten, you know.”

“ What a bore ! ”

“ But, you see, it’s my living.”

One liked that : Revel nodded, eyeing the approaches to the door.

“ The crowd seems a bit thinner. . . . If you’ll permit me to take you home in a taxi——”

“ You really think we can get out ? ”

“ We can try. I’ll forge ahead, if you don’t

mind, and you can follow in my wake, and perhaps you'll escape intact."

It was quite dark when at length, breathless but not materially damaged, they found themselves in open air, and the girl paused a moment to straighten her hat and furs.

"You are kind," she said. "I'd never have managed alone."

Odd how the indifferent illumination of the alley seemed to seek her face and dwell in her clear, smiling eyes. . . .

"Youth will be served," Revel said vaguely; "I know you don't want to keep Dick waiting."

"Afraid I always do."

("Always?")

"Youth doesn't understand that; it needs years to teach a man that waiting for a pretty woman has its pleasures and its value too. It takes patience to instil appreciation of reward."

Her sharp glance up at his face warned him that her quick perceptions had detected the personal note which, without his intention but through sheer laxity of habit, had crept

into his attitude. He promised to watch himself more closely (Dick must never have any excuse to complain of his father) and welcomed the diversion offered by a chance to hail a passing taxi.

She named a quiet residential hotel in the lower Fifties, east of the Avenue.

"I know," he said as he settled down by her side: "decent little hole. The Dudley-Hobarts stopped there last year, waiting for their apartment to be done over."

"I love it. I'm afraid Mother finds it dull, but I . . . Well, there's no use trying to hide it: I am getting to be a snob. I do like to live quietly, after the hotels we've always stopped at, full of noisy people who know all about you, call you 'dearie,' and talk nothing but theatrical shop."

"Then you like the change of conditions altogether, I imagine?"

"I never want to go back." She was momentarily pensive. "Of course, this won't last for ever, but . . ."

"No; if nothing else happens, you'll marry."

"I'm not thinking of that."

He was sensitive to an encouraging accent of settled purpose.

"Then you're not afraid of ever falling in love?"

"That's different. I'm not so silly as to hope I can escape. However, that's to come."

"Then . . . please don't think me impertinent . . . what are you driving at in life?"

She deliberated briefly, eyes now gravely levelled directly ahead, up the bedizened vista of the Avenue.

"I want," she said soberly, "to make money, lots of money, so Mother and I need never again worry about bookings, or keeping the act up to the minute with new stuff, or whether we can afford to spend a few weeks each summer in some decent seaside place. If the Club holds up, goes on as well as it promises to, I'll only need a year or two more. . . . Mrs. Wade has been so kind, and Queenie. . . . You see, Mr. Revel"—her smile shone softly in the broken illumination of passing lights—"I'm a hopelessly mercenary young woman."

"You're sensible, amazingly; it isn't often

one meets with so much common sense in one so young."

"Twenty-five isn't young——"

"I'll grant it doesn't think it is."

"Besides, a woman of the stage has got to be selfish—sensible, you call it—or go under. That's the first lesson. Some never learn it. Others, like me, harden young."

"You're not hard——"

"In some ways, no; but . . ." She had a slight movement of impatience. "I don't know if I can make you understand. . . . I daresay it seems strange coming from a girl of theatrical family, but I've learned to hate the stage; all its associations have come to be hateful to me."

There sounded in her voice a note of passionate earnestness: "Just now I'm luxuriating in a sense of escape from a sort of purgatory of hard work, uncertain pay, disappointments, jealousy, malice, insincerity, and worse, things I don't like to think about, things I suppose I'll never forget. . . . I can't go back, I feel as if I'd die . . . And if it ever comes to a question of being unselfish and going back—well, I won't be un-

selfish, I promise you, I'll be hard as nails. Even to-day"—she laughed consciously—"Dick says I'm the best business woman he knows."

"I think I understand." The reminder was timely. "Known Dick long?"

"Little over a month. We met through Mrs. Wade one day, at tea. He's a dear boy. I'm awfully fond of him."

Revel measured a neat pause, then: "Dick's fond of you," he said quietly.

Quick to values of timing and intonation, she stirred sharply in her corner, shifting a little to one side the better to see his face.

"In love with me, you mean?" Her voice was troubled. "Has he said so?"

"Not in words . . ."

"Oh, I hope he isn't!"

"Must it mean unhappiness for Dick?"

She shook her head and sighed gently. "I don't want him to be unhappy; I like him too much. He's so . . . Oh, why can't he just *like* me? Why must he fall in love with me? Why must people be so stupid about falling in love on the slightest provocation, or none?"

"My dear young woman: if you don't mind my saying so, I don't consider you 'the slightest provocation, or none.'"

"That's very sweet, but . . ." She gave a despairing gesture. "I don't want Dick to . . . He's so inclined to take things tragically."

"I think you know Dick pretty well."

"I know men a little. I've had to learn. . . . I know there's more than one kind of man. Dick's not—usual. He—he's a dear."

The taxi-cab had swung off the Avenue and was now with some difficulty turning in the narrow, crowded cross-town street. Openly disgruntled, Revel identified the canopy in front of her hotel.

"Beastly unsympathetic taxi," he grumbled—"evidently broken to married couples exclusively. Too bad: I'd have liked a longer talk."

She offered her hand, and returned his clasp with a pressure cool but friendly.

"Another time, perhaps. Thank you so much." . . .

Revel drove home in a thoughtful temper,

but not ill pleased : his overnight impression confirmed, that Dick was in no danger of premature or otherwise unsuitable marriage. The girl was distractingly intelligent and tempting, but the head on her pretty shoulders was what one termed level. She knew her little book : nothing but money, a great deal of money, would ever persuade her to relinquish her present freedom, when every advantage was to her in her relations with the world, that is to say with man, for bonds of wedlock. . . .

Well named : bonds of wedlock. . . .

Nearly an hour later he stopped short with the knot of his white dress tie only half-way toward that point of impeccability which was his pride, and for a long minute stood frowning darkly at the dark frowning countenance of the counterfeit Larry Revel in his dressing-mirror.

In that moment the secret was poignantly revealed to him of that strange distress which had visited him the night before on discerning the look in Dick's eyes as they followed the dancing of Nelly Steele. It was envy, Revel now knew, that he had felt, plain envy that

had stabbed his heart, envy of the boy's capacity for generous, whole-hearted, unselfish love, such untarnished adoration as twenty-two can know and give, and forty-five can but remember with wistfulness, repining for the thing that was and is now no more.

V

ON that Sunday Revel awoke in an amiable frame of mind which carried him singing through the rites of razor and tub, and smiling through the leisurely breakfast, the unhurried hour with the newspapers, and the still more deliberate process of dressing which most of all he loved, who stoutly held that in a man of proper respect for his person, hasty dressing is an abomination if not in true sense a sin against the social order.

Consequently his excellent good humour was unimpaired by the parting conference with his mirror.

If possible, it was even sweetened by his hour in church. Revel was wholly guiltless of any sort of devout persuasion; such religious feeling as had survived the wear of years existed mainly as scraps of superstition toward which he was habitually apathetic, but at which he was wont auto-

matically to clutch in moments of emotional stress, as when he wanted something very badly and didn't believe he was going to get it, or had done that which he should not have done and was afraid of being found out.

But it was now nearly a year since he had fallen into the church-going habit. For all her worldliness, Alice Lathom never missed a Sunday morning service ; and when Revel had contrived to secure a seat commanding an unobstructed view of the back of her head and the sweet round of one cheek, he adored with exemplary regularity.

After service he met Alice and the Coldicotts on the steps of the church and ambled with them as far as Park Avenue.

Though she continued to suspend decision on the question of their future relations, her bias was incontestable. Revel read it in lingering glances, in tender inflections of her matchless voice, in her gentle awareness of him, in that subtle and constant flow of feeling between them which was neither to be fixed nor named.

And yet, he was satisfied, not a soul suspected any sentiment between them more

than the kindness of simple friendship. Himself an adept tried and proven in the art of concealing his feelings, he watched her shrewdly and judged her dissembling flawless. What she gave out was consummately calculated to be perceptible to him alone.

When they paused at the entrance of their apartment house, the Coldicotts suggested a small dinner and Bridge to follow as the one possible way to counteract the debilitating influence of that deadliest of modern institutions, a Sunday evening in Town.

“ . . . To take the curse off it,” Amelia explained.

Revel demurred, pleading some prior arrangement, till by means so delicate that he himself was unable to define it, Alice communicated to him her desire that he accept. Understanding from this that Frank Lathom would not be present, he confessed inability to stand out against the allure of Bridge, promised to lie out of his fictitious engagement, and went his way discreetly gladdened.

A slow saunter down the radiant noon-day Avenue contributed measurably to his elation. He saw any number of pleasant people he knew, saluted them gaily in passing, or paused for moments of light chatter; eventually picked up a quarter-dozen of the right sort and lunched them to admiration at Sherry's, spontaneously saying one or two good things (thriftily memorized to double duty at dinner); spent an amusing hour at the University Club dilating on how giddy free the seas would be when policed by the League of Nations, and how neatly secret diplomacy had been abolished by employing confidential agents to do all the underground work before ostentatious diplomacy took the boards; and, still in the happiest of moods, drifted back to his rooms to dress at about half after five, and found them full of smoke, desperation, and Dick.

The young man occupied the roomiest chair, sprawling largely on the nape of his neck and the small of his back, limp arms and long dejected legs overflowing. His hair was anarchistic, his eyes volcanic, his

mouth calamitous. On a stand at his elbow a tall whisky and soda rested untouched, and an ash tray abrim with half-consumed cigarettes exhaled a pestilential reek. A more brilliant representation of young love in the dumps could hardly have been devised. If anything, it was a shade overdrawn. Only at some cost of credulity might one accept it as unstudied when one remembered the penchant for the picturesque that ran in the Revel strain.

“ Well, Dicky boy ! ”

“ Hello, Dad. . . . ”

The cavernous echo of despair was almost too much ; nevertheless Revel preserved untwitching lips and sympathetic eyes as, surrendering hat, coat, and stick, he dismissed his valet with a look.

“ Waiting long ? ”

“ Thought you'd never come . . . ”

“ Wish I'd known.” Revel strolled over to the chair and dropped a light hand on the boy's shoulder. “ What's on the good old mind ? ”

Dick uttered an incoherent grunt, then the one word adequate : “ Hell ! ”

“ Large order. How’d you come by it ? ”

With a groan Dick heaved himself into a position slightly less uncouth.

“ You’ll laugh at me. . . . ”

“ Have I ever ? Even when you’ve tried me hardest ”

“ This is different. ”

“ Always is, isn’t it ? ”

“ Suppose it must seem that way to you on the outside. ”

“ But I’ve been on the inside, old boy. I know how most things hurt, and why. ”

“ Well, but ” Dick ran distracted hands through his hair, plumbed the depths of his trousers pockets with them, and subsided into abject glooming, chin on chest. “ I don’t want to bore you. ”

“ No fear. And even so, you’ve got to talk, you know ; that’s what you’re here for ; and it’s the only safe outlet man knows for any real trouble. ”

With an impatient growl the boy stretched forth a hand, but his father in a manner of complete abstraction took up the whisky and soda just in time to let Dick’s fingers grasp emptiness. Then, strolling aimlessly

round the room, hesitating now and then for ruminative sips, he expounded, didactic :

“ Drink quenches no hell-fire of one’s own kindling. Rather it adds fuel to the flames. So I sacrifice my abstemious principles to do you a service.”

Dick sulked. Pausing, Revel eyed him doubtfully, deliberating on a wicked inspiration of the instant. “ Kill or cure . . .” he told himself : to be beforehand with Dick might prove half the battle. Yet he demurred another moment : the boy was so confoundedly dear to him, so handsomely unhappy, it was hard to hurt him, even for his good. “ What must be, must. . . .”

Revel consulted his watch and gave a well-feigned start.

“ Bless me ! no idea it was so late. Excuse me a moment, will you, my boy.”

He sat down at his desk with his back to Dick, riffled the pages of the telephone directory, and drawing the instrument to him called :

“ Murray Hill four five two five, please.”

The chair springs creaked as Dick sat forward suddenly.

“ Hello : Miss Steele, please—Miss Nelly Steele. . . . Yes.”

He heard Dick jump out of the chair, and pictured to himself the questioning pose, innocent now of any consciousness.

A non-committal voice saluted the ear at the receiver : “ Hello : who is this ? ”

“ Miss Steele ? Good evening. This is Mr. Revel.”

A slight wait prefaced a more cordial tone in which, however, surprise wasn't wanting : “ Why, how do you do, Mr. Revel. . . .”

“ I've been wondering if you'd care to lunch with me to-morrow. If you've nothing better to do, I'd like awfully well to continue our little talk.”

“ But is it done—without a chaperone, I mean ? ”

The voice was cool enough, but Revel, detecting its accent of secret amusement, was unabashed.

“ Everything goes in New York nowadays, that isn't too conspicuous. Trust me to arrange that we shan't be . . .”

Demure humour tinged the reply : “ Yes ; I fancy one can trust you for that.”

"Then you'll come? Good! Will the Gotham be agreeable—say, at one?"

"It sounds most discreet. Yes—and thank you."

"Thank you, Miss Steele."

Revel hung up and turned in his chair, to open astonished eyes at Dick, looming over him with a thunderous countenance.

"Hel-lo!"

Dick's voice was trembling; so were his hands. "Why did you do that?"

"Eh? Why not? Attractive young woman. . . . Taxi'd her home from Angela Earle's tea-fight, Friday. Had a most interesting talk, but not enough of it, you know."

The guileless stare served. Dick swung away in a manner at once apologetic and injured. "Of course, you couldn't know . . . I love her."

Revel had a drawl of incredulous protest:
"Oh, *no* . . ."

"I tell you I do!"

"My dear boy, I am so sorry."

Revel got up, glass in hand. Dick turned on him in a flash of rage.

" Sorry ? Why ? Why shouldn't I love her ? "

" Easy, Dick ! No reason on earth, if you're going in for that sort of thing."

" What sort of thing ? What do you mean ? "

A small pause lengthened while Revel stared thoughtfully into the infuriated eyes of his son. Then he shrugged. " Perhaps I don't understand——"

" You don't. I love Nelly Steele honestly. I want her to marry me."

" Oh, come now ! "

" No : I'm in deadly earnest. She loves me."

" It's got as far as that already ? "

" Well . . . she hasn't exactly said so, but I know. She couldn't deceive me to that extent."

" You know best, perhaps. But if you're satisfied about that, please—what the deuce are you so unhappy about ? "

" Wade : I can't stand him hanging round her all the time, his insolent air of proprietorship and his damnable arrogance toward me, just because I'm a few years younger. . . . What right has he ? A married man ! "

“ Married men haven’t any rights—if you’re seeking fundamental truths. All the same, sometimes they take them. . . . I don’t quite see how you’re going to stop Ross. The girl’s under such heavy obligations to his mother.”

“ That’s what makes it all so impossible. As long as she’s beholden to that grasping old harriidan for money as well as social backing, Nelly’s got to stand for Wade. And—and—I tell you—I can’t—I won’t . . . It drives me frantic ! ”

With a wide movement of exasperation Dick flung himself across the room and into the chair. “ Something’s got to be done. . . . ”

Revel scowled at his half-emptied glass and set it on the mantel with the meticulous pains of one preparing for a neat effect in sleight of hand.

“ What would you suggest ? ” he asked without turning.

“ She’s got to marry me.”

There was a long silence. Revel remained apparently semi-hypnotized by the play of light in the pale amber contents of the glass.

"She's got to. . . . It's the only way to put an end to an intolerable . . ."

Still Revel offered no comment. Abstractedly he helped himself to a cigarette and lighted it. Behind him there was a sound of impatient shifting in the chair, then an explosive: "Damn! . . . Why don't you say something? Oh, I know well enough what you're thinking!"

"Do you?" Revel looked round in mild inquiry.

"You think I'm too young to marry. Naturally: you're prejudiced . . ."

"No-o; I ought to be, after my life with your sainted mother and what I've seen my best friends go through, but . . . I find my views of late years more lenient toward institutions as well as men. Marriage is a tolerably rugged custom—stands up amazingly for anything so wide open to criticism for defects that would prove fatal to any other social institution."

"Then you'd marry again if . . ."

"If I wanted to—yes."

"But you don't want me to!"

"I'm not strong for early marriages, I

admit. They're seldom founded on any reasonable understanding. When the twain calm down, as a rule they discover they are one in nothing but servitude, and another passion common to all humanity asserts itself, the imperative need for self-expression. Its first essays inevitably focus upon the environment; the individual attempts to dominate the environment, and naturally selects the most conspicuous feature thereof, the husband or the wife, for initial subjugation. If the individual doesn't feel this impulse to dominate, he or she isn't worth being married to. If he or she does and tries it on—the struggle begins between two personalities each owning an inalienable right to self-expression, and no matter which wins or whether it's a draw, the holy bonds of matrimony are in a fair way to become the fetters of a hell on earth. Dick . . .”

Revel clapped both hands on his boy's shoulders. “Dick, don't ever marry for anything but love.”

“That's all I'm thinking of.”

“Is it?” Revel moved away. “My im-

pression was, you were proposing to do Ross Wade one in the eye."

"I want to protect her from him. No; I don't mean that, not that way. Eliminating Wade's only a side issue, of course. I love her. So I want to marry her—you see."

"I see you want to marry her, but I don't see that she wants to marry you."

"You don't think she loves me?"

"That's as may be. I don't think she's the marrying sort."

The boy's eyes hardened. "Just what do you mean——?"

"Even if Nelly loves you, she remains one of the few cool-headed, clear-sighted women I've ever met. That kind doesn't marry for love primarily, nor for money, nor for social advantages, but for the combination of all three; and you haven't all three to offer her. Even if I settle on you what will be a handsome sum coming from a man of my small fortune, you'll be far from wealthy as wealth is measured nowadays. Socially you're acceptable, it's true, but you haven't the weight, the influence to offset the hostility

of Mrs. Wade—something Nelly will inevitably incur if she marries you. Finally, Nelly's no such fool as to underrate the handicap of a husband younger than herself."

Dick dug his elbows into his knees and buried his face in his hands. "You're breaking my heart!"

"Dear old son: I'm so sorry. Just remember: love isn't necessarily disappointed if it doesn't marry."

With a low cry the boy jumped up, his face blazing.

"You shan't talk that way about Nelly!"

"To my mind, I compliment her intelligence, when I suggest she has too much sense to marry when she doesn't have to."

"You impugn her honour——"

"I do not."

"You do, when you make her out a mere mercenary. I tell you, I know she's——"

"You know nothing except that you love her blindly. Dick, let me tell you my considered belief: we all have our price, every last one of us. I have, you have, Nelly Steele has hers. And I can prove it."

"You can't. Damn it! I know she's . . .

Why, Dad, hardly a night passes that I don't see her from the Club to the door of her hotel."

"And what proves what?"

"You've no right to question——"

"I have a right to raise every question concerning the woman with whom my boy's happiness rests. Dick: we've been closer than most; few fathers know their sons as I know you; few sons know their fathers as you know me. Yet you love me, as I love you: your happiness is my first consideration. I can't stand idly by and see you rush into marriage with a woman about whom neither you nor I know anything—except that she is completely charming. All I ask you to do is to test her, prove her either gold or dross, before you commit yourself."

"I've got no right to insult her with a doubt——"

"Is a legitimate question an insult? Dick: subtract her beauty; what have you left? Human flesh and blood, as common as yours and mine—whose frailty I know, few men better. If she prove better than the

average—God bless you both : may you live happily for ever after. That shall be my prayer.”

Baffled, bewildered, almost in tears, the boy made a sullen gesture.

“ What do you propose ? ”

“ A simple test. . . . Stay away from her for a fortnight.”

“ What good will that do ? ”

“ I’ll tell you when you’ve promised.” The boy hesitated with a sullen face. Revel extended a pleading hand. “ Dick : I ask it of you—in fairness to my great love for you.”

“ Very well.”

Their hands met : Revel made his clasp firm.

“ You will not seek her or write to her for a fortnight ? ”

“ I promise . . . word of honour.”

With a sigh, Revel released his hand. “ Thank God,” he said with the simplicity of deep emotion.

“ Now tell me what you expect this to prove.”

“ One of two things : that she is all you think she is—or that she is not.”

" And—and if she isn't—how will you prove that to me ? "

A look weary and compassionate shadowed Revel's eyes.

" You have already seen that she doesn't hesitate to encourage the attentions of a man almost twice her age—a divorced man with a reputation—God help me!—much too conspicuous for philandering."

" You are my father: her interest in me——"

" Dick," Revel said solemnly: " if I am right, two weeks from this Sunday, at midnight, Nelly Steele will be in these rooms, with me, alone."

The boy started back with a cry of almost agonized protest: " Ah, no ! "

" If not, I not only withdraw every objection, I'll do everything in my power to facilitate an early marriage between you."

" Don't you know that if you . . . succeed . . . I'll never forgive you ? "

" Even so I shall have saved you from marriage with an unworthy woman."

" You will risk my love for you—— ? "

" To assure your happiness—yes."

" I refuse to permit you——"

" You have given your word not to see or communicate with her in any way."

" Then give me back my word ! "

" No. It is my duty to hold you to it."

" It's wrong, damnably. . . ." The boy faltered, turned aside, and dragged slowly toward the door.

" Dick ! "

In the doorway Dick turned, regarding Revel with haggard eyes. Revel moved toward him with a hand outstretched.

" Good-night, dear boy."

In sudden passion Dick made a violent motion as if to strike down the hand.

" God forgive you . . . "

Standing where he had been left, Revel heard the rattle of the door latches, then the dull slam. A sense of fatality enchained his body and his mind as well. For several minutes he did not move. . . .

VI

IN a turn of singular detachment such as sometimes without warning takes hold upon a mind harassed, causing it to perceive the commonplace as novel, in a guise of false strangeness, Revel found himself contemplating the Coldicott dining-table with its fringe of guests as if with the eyes of an outsider newly introduced to the house and its company.

At the oblong refectory table with its covering of rare lace beneath glass, its gentle illumination by twin candelabra of triple arms, its faultless service of plate and china-ware, six people were seated. The Dudley-Hobarts had promised to come, but at the last moment had telephoned begging off, their excuse the inevitable motor breakdown out of town. Amelia was, she protested, furious at having her proposed two tables of Bridge thus upset. Now it was too late to

find acceptable substitutes: impossible to get good Bridgers as second choice, on a scant hour's notice. They'd simply have to cut in and out, leaving two always idle. She was sorry: they could blame the Dudley-Hobarts.

Privately Revel was not sorry. This hitch would, he hoped, afford him opportunity to talk alone with Alice for a few minutes. He had not had a word in private with her since Thursday night at the Ritz. And more than ever he needed to-night the comfort of her sympathy, her unfailing understanding. That scene with Dick was preying on his mind; no matter how light his manner—and he plumed himself that he was carrying on without a sign—there was ever that undercurrent of uneasiness, a secret tugging at his heart-strings gave him no rest. He loved the boy too well. The bare thought that one might have so blundered as in any measure to alienate his affection was distressing beyond belief.

For the moment he was left to himself. On his right Queenie had turned to chaff with Coldicott; the brisk give-and-take of their

lightly malicious wit made a rumour of pleasant animation. On his left Amelia was talking more soberly with Georges Benzoni, whose dark-skinned face of smooth Oriental cast was rendered brilliant by eyes that burned like black opals with the light of self-content. Apparently his affair with Nora Nettleton still went well. Beyond him, Alice sat listening with a quiet smile to the dialogue between Ben Coldicott and Queenie.

With a feeling of security in the preoccupation of the others, Revel permitted himself the indiscretion of dwelling hungrily upon the vision of Alice. He sat a trifle back from the table, plump, immaculate fingers of one hand resting on the edge of the plate glass, a cigarette poised in the other, head inclined attentively, as if he too were diverted by the nonsense passing on his right, insatiable eyes glimmering under slightly lowered lids.

She had the serenity, he thought, the sure poise of the lily whose fairness was rivalled by the fairness of her arms and neck, and its finish, too. She was perfection. . . . No : that word was too cold, inadequate ; one must fare without the English language for

the term to do her justice: *soignée*. . . .
The truth was, she was indescribable.

His gaze followed tenderly the pure, firm contours of her face, her low broad brow, the fine arch of her nose, the lips like petals of some red exquisite flower, the sweet sweep of her throat. . . .

She was to be his. . . . He denied his knowledge that she was now another's, a thought to drive one mad, and held with all his strength to the consolation in the belief that she was one day to be his.

Becoming aware of the intensity of his concentration, she looked round to him; a look of affection, compassion, and intelligence. Then with one swift glance aside, deep lashes curtained her eyes; and Revel, shaking off his abstraction, was conscious of the stare of Benzoni, and mustered an aspect of blinking stupidity against that mocking glitter of discovery. But his heart misgave him; he had betrayed himself; not that he cared, on his part; but Alice . . .

Queenie turned on him with a challenging quip. Instantly he recollected himself and countered smartly. A ripple of laughter

rewarded him. That moment of aloofness had passed—but it had been too long.

In the drawing-room, he cut into the first rubber and played through two with more than his habitual brilliancy of cardsmanship. Then he was obliged to sit out with Amelia through one tedious and hard-fought rubber before his patience was repaid. It was nearly eleven before Alice rose, crossed the room, and with a little gasp of mock exhaustion dropped into one end of the small settee.

“Three rubbers is too much—the cut-throat game we play. A cigarette, please, lest I perish.”

Revel supplied her demands, then thoughtfully arranged cushions to support her back.

“Fancy you could do with a drink, too—what?”

“Thanks—plain water, please.”

He filled two glasses from a crystal jug, and settled down beside her.

“A bit shy of whisky to-night,” he explained to the humorous arch of her eyebrows: “upset . . .”

“I knew.” Her glance fled to the card

table ; but the quartet there was already bidding on the first hand. "What is it, cher ami ?"

"Anxiety about the only two beings on earth that mean anything to me. You, to begin with—you make no sign."

She let him take her half-emptied glass and as he put it aside folded her hands in her lap, sitting motionless but for the gentle stir of her bosom, her countenance inscrutable.

He had a short-lived spasm of exasperation, muttering: "You drive me mad with suspense. . . ."

"Must I put an end to it to-night ?"

"If you have mercy in your heart . . ."

She said deliberately, her lips scarcely moving: "It shall be as you wish."

He was profoundly moved, beyond speech ; but the eloquence of his dumbness was such that her immobility was broken by a sharp look of warning.

"No fear," he said quietly, reassuming the trifler's mask: "not twice in the same place, thanks."

Her eyes grew dark with inquiry.

"Benzoni," he replied: "at the table, I'm

afraid. Remember ? ” She nodded. “ I may have been mistaken.”

“ I think not ; he’s dangerously intuitive.” Then her dubiety lightened surprisingly. “ But I forget . . . It doesn’t matter — does it ?—now I’m decided, the die is cast, for better or worse.”

“ You mean it ?—at last ! ”

Her gaze dropped to her hands. She flexed significantly her slender, supple fingers. With a sense of shock Revel perceived the absence from the number of her matchless rings of one slight hoop of diamonds set in platinum.

“ When ? ”

Her eyes held downcast, her words were barely audible : “ Last night.”

“ What happened ? ”

She looked up, her mouth convulsed, her eyes haunted, and he murmured in contrition : “ Forgive . . . I had no right to ask.”

“ Then no one has. . . . It was just the usual thing. . . . He’s going away for a week to-morrow. This time he makes only the flimsiest pretext of deceiving me. When he comes back I shall be gone.”

"I must see you alone—as soon as possible."

She nodded—"I'll telephone"—made a gesture of dismissal and resolutely composed her features. "Now tell me about Dick."

In the flux of emotion Revel had forgotten; for an instant his eyes were blank.

"Why you're so anxious about him to-night . . ."

"Oh . . . The young fool's in love with Nelly Steele."

"The dancer?"

"Do you know her?"

"I saw her for the first time last night, at the Club de Danse. She's . . . incomparable, don't you think?"

"Extraordinary. . . . But Dick wants to marry her."

She said as if puzzled: "Well?"

"It's unthinkable." Revel had a short laugh of derision. "An actress . . . Dick . . . I should say not!"

"I hope you haven't talked to him like that?"

"He told me only this evening. Natur-

ally, I spoke my mind—told him the thing was impossible.”

“ Oh, I understand how you feel. In your place, I’d feel as you do. But”—her hand rested lightly on the back of his for a mere instant—“ are you wise, my friend ? ” Revel opened astonished eyes. “ I mean : Dick’s no fool, but he’s hopelessly human, Larry, very much the son of his father. Trust him to find out for himself if there’s anything. . . . If there isn’t, let the affair run its natural course, and don’t worry. Left to itself, young love will as often as not burn out of its own accord. But contend against it, dignify it with sincere opposition . . . You plunge soft iron at white heat into cold water : you know what happens then.”

“ But you’re mistaken in Dick ; he’s reasonable. We had a row, rather, but in the end I persuaded him. He’s going to keep away from her for a fortnight. He promised.”

Her tone was patient and regretful. “ What good do you imagine that will do ? Two weeks’ separation, if he really loves the girl . . . ”

“ It will give me time to size her up.”

“ How ? ”

Revel had a sense of thin ice, but remained infatuate with his purpose, his determination at whatever cost to disillusion Dick.

“ I mean to see something of her, of course—as much as possible.” Alice was silent. “ I’m not precisely stupid. If there’s anything wrong——”

“ You’re convinced there is ? ”

“ I’m convinced she’s not the sort to be the wife of my son.”

“ And you think you can convince Dick. Why, Larry ! I thought better of your worldly wisdom. Don’t you know youth never profits by the wisdom its elders have won through suffering ? It can’t. In affairs of the heart, I mean, of course. You can’t talk youth out of its passions, its illusions. It won’t believe you till it has learned the brutal truth for itself. Look back : did you—or I—believe life was cruel—could anybody have made us believe it—till we had lived long enough to learn ? ”

But Revel wouldn’t listen. Doggedly he persisted : “ Dick wont be able to ignore

such evidence as I mean to lay before him."

"If you are right. But if you are wrong——"

"If I am, it'll be the first time in many years I've been mistaken about a woman."

And he said this, who so utterly misjudged the woman who loved him! Her eyes clouded. And, blindly, he misread them.

"I'll make her betray herself before the two weeks are up. . . ."

"But what of me."

He gaped out of the depths of his imbecility: "You?"

"Did you imagine I'd approve——?"

"What has it to do with you?"

"You mean to test this girl by making love to her yourself."

Too late he perceived how irretrievably he had committed himself. Discountenanced, he faltered: "It may, of course, be necessary to pay her some attention——"

"Flirt with her, you mean: play the game you know best, and play it to win; you don't know any other way with a woman. Larry: you're an attractive man; you can be

fascinating when you want to. You'd have to be, when I know you as I do, to make me willing to risk a second tragedy by marrying you. And this girl is so young——”

“Older than Dick——”

“That doesn't matter: she's at least twenty years younger than you. She can't help but be flattered if you . . . You're proposing to play with fire. Is it wise of you, Larry? Is it kind to Nelly Steele? Is it fair to me?”

“I promise you——”

“Don't. You can't make me any promise you can trust yourself to keep. You are inflammable yourself.”

“Not I. I'm beyond danger—insulated by my love for you.”

“I wonder if you really believe that yourself. . . .” Abashed, his eyes winced.

“Larry, be advised, be sensible, be generous. I beg you, give this up——”

“I can't let Dick risk ruining his life.”

“Give it up, Larry. I warn you, if you refuse, you may have to give me up instead.”

He muttered sullenly: “Don't be unreasonable——”

He was interrupted by a crow of triumph from the card table : " Grand slam, game and rubber ! " Ben Coldicott pushed back his chair. " Hard labour enough. Let's call it a night, and quit. " He looked round to the settee. " Hello ! what are you two so surreptitious about ? "

" My future——"

" No fit topic in mixed company, Larry ; your future's a past. "

" Good old wheeze, Ben. " Revel grimaced tolerantly and, as one pursuing an interrupted conversation, addressed Alice directly : " Des-say you're right. Perhaps matrimony would be good for me. "

She said sweetly the last word : " It might bring you to your senses, if anything could ! "



VII

NELLY Steele entered the Gotham with a confidence partly innate, partly the result of training, but in the main inspired by the knowledge that her most becoming gown and furs could hardly have been in any way more becoming.

Nevertheless, she was not ill pleased to see no signs of Revel in the lobby.

In the lounge, the small room opening off the restaurant at the back of the elevators, where she was quite alone—another circumstance entirely to her liking—she settled herself easily and picturesquely to wait and think. She liked to think things out in anticipation, such as what her attitude toward Revel must be. It made her feel comfortably sure of herself, and to-day especially she wanted to feel and to seem that way. She was rather glad than otherwise that a minor subterfuge practised upon her mother,

in order to get away unquestioned, had brought her to the hotel before the hour of her appointment.

Not that Nelly recognized any reason why she should not lunch with Mr. Revel, or with anybody else, in her unrestricted discretion ; but she was jealous of the absolute freedom of action to which she felt herself entitled by virtue of her twenty-five years, and impatient of any sort of supervision. Whereas Mother, since retiring from the stage, had fallen—largely through lack of other interests—into a habit of more or less vague and ineffective gestures of anxiety appropriate to the rôle of doting mother to a pretty, spirited, prepossessing young woman who had already, unaided, scored a conspicuous popular success and now seemed in a fair way to become, what Mother was fond of calling her, the pampered darling of Society. So Nelly was prone to act on the theory that what Mother didn't know couldn't worry either of them.

There were times when, in spite of her aversion for the life of the theatre, she was conscious of being more than a little irked by the unending circumspection which, rightly or

wrongly, Mother thought was required of her in this walk of life. She was quite frankly, as she had confessed to Revel the other night in the taxi-cab, delighted with the change in her circumstances and prospects ; and she was, furthermore, firmly resolved that she would conquer this agreeable new world, bring it to her feet and keep it there, if this were to be compassed through any exercise of native wit, tact, discretion, and courage. Her life had known too many crying wants for her to be willing to forgo without a struggle or to forfeit through indiscretion those golden opportunities and advantages which she now saw apparently opening to her through her association with people whose names were nationally synonymous with wealth and power—people who seemed to like her quite spontaneously too.

All the same, it was a satisfaction once in a while to do something which, because it might possibly be frowned upon by the super-straitlaced, testified to an unimpaired independence of spirit : as this mild little adventure of lunching alone with a man of the local reputation of Mr. Laurence Revel,

something which imbued her with a pleasant sense of daring. And entirely aside from the allure that danger has for the human animal of either sex, it was gratifying to think she had been singled out for special attention by a man of personal attractions reputedly so disastrous.

She liked the little flutter of anticipation in which she was awaiting him, and even more the confidence that it was thoroughly disguised on a surface equanimity of which she was absolute mistress.

She wondered whether personal interest in her had prompted Revel's invitation, or curiosity about the woman with whom Dick had fallen in love. . . .

In spite of her professional success, there was a marked strain of humility in the composition of the girl's nature: not snobbery toward wealth and social position, but deep-seated respect for superior attainments, accomplishments, and qualities, anything which she could attribute to the workings of a superior mentality. She was even predisposed to be meek toward musicians, though her stage life had thrown her so much with

them that she now privately rated them as artists a little lower than the angels, as individuals only a cut above acrobats. She had no suspicion of what a finely organized machine her own brain was, but was apt to depreciate its mettle and capacity because she earned her living, as some one had said to her, with her feet ; dancing with her was such an instinctive, involuntary thing, a sort of singing of her whole body, that she was satisfied thought had nothing to do with it. And Dick's enthusiasm for his father had inspired in her a tolerably exaggerated notion of Revel's intellectual calibre ; he would have been amused had he known that his professional status of "corporation lawyer" inclined the girl to regard him with some degree of awe.

While waiting, and indeed all through luncheon, she was subconsciously busy trying to identify those peculiar facets of his personality which made him so interesting, so engaging, and according to report so dangerous.

An impersonal courtesy intrinsic and un-studied, a uniform flow of animal spirits,

and an amiable bearing, amused, tolerant, never priggish, toward people and things, provoked liking and admiration. On reflection she decided that more than most things she liked in a man this tempered poise. And then, Revel never betrayed any tendency to think himself a person of particular consequence ; neither did he seem to think there was anybody of more consequence—except, always, herself. Toward her his demeanour was in moderation deferential ; she was given to understand that she was a person of some importance, to be respected, considered, catered to. A most distinctly satisfying sensation : it made her, she confessed to herself, want to purr. To all other men she was something to be admired wistfully, made love to hopefully, flirted with cautiously pour passer le temps, flattered with condescension, seldom to be met on any common ground.

Quite decidedly Revel made way with her that day. She liked his clothes and the way he wore them. She liked his luncheon and the fact that it was ready to be served as soon as they were seated. To

find that Revel had looked forward to lunching with her with sufficient interest to telephone his order in advance was to realize a compliment subtle but memorable.

With such a pattern to go by, no wonder Dick had turned out to be such a nice boy.

At that moment Nelly found herself thinking of Dick as much more boyish than she had appreciated . . . perhaps too much so. She recalled with a feeling of indulgent pity his drolly tragic face when she declined to consider his proposal so momentous as to require the answer he demanded : yes or no. Funny, he should be so jealous of Rossiter Wade. As if she'd waste a moment on that one if she were not beholden to his mother . . . so manifestly the wrong sort, the sort she couldn't be patient with, the sort she had learned so well how to handle—at arm's length. If Dick only knew how abiding was her contempt for the Ross breed and how deeply rooted her confidence in her ability to deal with it . . .

Now about Revel she wasn't so sure. . . .

She began to understand how he had earned his nickname, Beau Revel.

She wondered if he knew Dick had proposed to her. If so, he probably knew her answer, and considered the matter settled and of no more importance. When he had telephoned her, last night, he had said something about wanting to continue their talk in the taxi-cab ; but now Revel seemed to have forgotten that, and to be bent solely on making their hour at table enjoyable.

Was it possible that he found her as interesting as he seemed to ?

Effortless and constant, his sympathetic regard enfolded her like an atmosphere.

Of a sudden and without premeditation she found herself telling him about the scape-grace sponge of a younger brother whose propensity for getting into trouble and out of a job worked with indifference to her affection and her mother's to frustrate every effort to make anything of him better than a theatrical camp follower.

" He doesn't seem to care. If he goes on this way, he'll never be even a good chorus man ; he hasn't any voice, his dancing is third-rate, he can't act ; but he isn't happy unless he's painting his nose. Maybe it's in

the blood. Perhaps I'd be as bad, denied the fun of dancing and applause. But it seems a pity . . ."

"What's he doing now?"

"He's on the road with a musical comedy. It closes Saturday night in Philadelphia. By Sunday morning he'll be on our hands again."

She checked just in time to avoid detailing how very thoroughly Bert would be on their hands, once he learned how she was prospering. He really asked very little of life: a place to lay his head, casual meals, money for cigarettes, wasp-waisted coats and trick shoes, the privilege of obstructing traffic on the sidewalks of Longacre Square while discussing loftily the politics of the theatrical world: given these, and Bert would avoid "accepting an engagement" with a diligence and an impersonation of misprized worth and ambition under the tyrant heel of circumstance, that would have made his fortune behind footlights.

But Revel was not without intuition.

"Send him to me. Let's see if we can't do something with him. He must be good

for something. Every last one of us is. The trouble is, most of us never find out what it is, because nobody takes enough interest to reveal us to ourselves. If I can win his confidence, I'll soon find out and place him where he'll be both contented and useful."

"You're most kind, but——"

"No: not kind, as selfish as the next man you meet."

"Now I don't understand . . ."

Revel had the quiet smile that goes so well with profession of human weakness. "None of us do many things without self-interest as the motive. I find you so delightful, I want you to think well of me. If I solve the problem of your brother for you, I shall be serving myself: even though you find it tiresome, you'll sometimes lighten the loneliness middle age knows too well by lunching with me or, if you've nothing better to do, dining. . . ."

He worked aggrieved brows over the mirth in her eyes. "Now you're laughing at me!"

"The thought of your being lonesome . . ."

" I know : because I've got a host of acquaintances ; but you can't know how few friends. You'll have to come to forty-five before you understand. By that time most of the friends of your youth have gone the way of all flesh : marriage has claimed some, death has taken others almost painlessly ; some have drifted into weird ways of life, like writing novels or reading them ; others vote for Prohibition and subsist incomprehensibly on disgruntled milk and dreaded wheat ; far too many have prematurely committed suburbicide."

His sigh was heavy with disconsolation. " Now Dick has deserted me to set up his own bachelor establishment, I foresee and perceive only a weary vista of club dinners, all tasting precisely alike, flavoured with the same wheezes, and slippered evenings at home, with hissing gas-logs and the enormous, inexorable enervation of the *Evening Post*. . . ."

" It sounds very dreadful." The girl wagged her head in mock commiseration. " But somehow I feel quite sure it isn't going to be like that at all."

" You mean "—he brightened amazingly—

“ you’ve already made up your mind to let me give you a luncheon or a little dinner every once in so often ? ”

“ I don’t mean anything of the sort ; but . . . if you insist on asking me, I’m afraid I shall accept.”

“ ‘ Afraid ’ ? . . . Depressing word ! ”

“ Humbug,” said Nelly Steele. “ You know you like it.”

VIII

IN the lamp-stung violet dusk of that November afternoon the town car rolled into the court of the Park Avenue apartment block, and stopped. Its door was opened by a saluting porter. In her corner Alice Lathom stirred, with an effect of surprise, then got out and moved toward the entrance hall in a fit of abstraction so complete that the apologetic porter had to pursue and remind her she had neglected to say whether or not the car was to wait.

She paused, in some hesitation made up her mind, and sent word back to the chauffeur that she would not need him again that night.

A latchkey admitted her to the place she called home. Closing the door quietly, she stood listening to a murmur of voices which, drifting down the hallway of the servants' quarters, was deadened by a swing door. Apparently her return was not known. In-

differently content that this should be so, she went on to her dressing-room and there put off her hat and furs. The face she viewed in her mirror was overcast with weariness of long and fruitless thought, with doubt and indecision ; but the melancholy in its eyes served only to make spiritual its beauty. Her jealous inspection discovered no flaw, no sign of wrinkle, no hint of superfluous flesh, that symptom of physical deterioration which most of all things she dreaded. She was perhaps a little pale. Mechanically yet delicately she applied a trace of rouge and powder. At thirty-three she remained one of the most beautiful women in New York.

As she turned away, she noticed a square florist's box on her dressing-table, and as she severed its cords, the passionate fragrance of violets assailed her senses. She shut her eyes for a moment, affected by a slight feeling of vertigo. The rouge she had just applied gained a sharp accent as her native colour faded beneath it. She drew a deep breath and resolutely resumed command of herself.

The sealed envelope with the flowers was addressed in Revel's hand : " Mrs. Lathom."

Within it was a card bearing the symbol " ? "—and nothing more. But she understood. He was asking why she had not kept her promise of last Sunday to telephone and make an appointment to see him alone. Sunday seemed a day incalculably remote. She had lived a lifetime since. . . . Yet nothing had happened, she had wasted day after day doubting herself, doubting him, doubting all things. To-day was Thursday.

She was stricken by a pang of self-reproach, poignant and enduring. She had not kept her promise, she had deliberately avoided all places that he frequented, she had let him wait and wait, in Heaven knew what torment of wonder and suspense. Had she perhaps wronged him in her thoughts? Was he too suffering as she had suffered?

Lifting the violets in both hands, she pressed her face into their sweetness and, inhaling their heady and languorous perfume, felt herself relaxing from the desperate nervous tension of the last few days, as if she breathed into body and soul breaths of love anodyne to all pain and care and distrust. When she put down the flowers, her eyes were clear and

shining, her face was luminous with confidence. She went to the telephone-stand, sat down, and communicated to the receiver the number for Revel's rooms.

His valet knew her voice. He said : " No, Mrs. Lathom, Mr. Revel hasn't been home this afternoon. Is there any message ? "

" Thank you, Rudge ; say I will call up again, about seven."

In heavy disappointment, she proceeded to the drawing-room with dragging steps. To the maid whom she found kneeling before the fireplace applying a match to kindling, she said : " You may serve tea, please, Anna."

Standing beside a table, she took up a book, opened it at random, scanned half a page intently, and put it down without knowing either what she had read or the title of the volume. Her gaze wandered round the room, lingering on objects indelibly associated with her early married life, things she and Frank had shopped for together in that glamorous time when they were happily assembling the elements of a home. Her mind was haunted by misty memories of days with Frank in

Florence, in Rome, in Munich, Paris, London . . .

All fair days dead. . . .

Anna brought in the muffin-stand, then the tea service. She saw the shining silver vessels and translucent chinaware set out upon a stand close by the chair in which she was accustomed to sit, near the fire. The hall clock sounded a musical salute to the half-hour. She was expecting nobody. Still she delayed, denying the desire for tea, and turned away.

Thrusting aside the draperies, she contemplated from the recess of a window the confounding spectacle of man-made cliffs, tier upon tier of golden windows which, rearing insolently into a sky of profound purple, starless, serene, and vast, walled in a well of night searched through and through by stray, uncertain shafts of light, wavering, crossing and recrossing, yearning and frustrate . . . like restless wraiths of mortal passions insatiable even in death.

In a dull way she was aware of the muffled, incessant grumble of traffic, and presently, more near, the tinkle of the house tele-

phone. She heard the maid answer, and turned from the window as Anna entered and announced: "Mr. Revel is calling, Mrs. Lathom."

She felt as if she were being suffocated by wave on wave of emotion, and wondered if it were true that Anna was eyeing her strangely as, with difficulty, she made herself say in an inconsequent voice: "Please ask him to come up."

It was her intention to return to the fireplace and pose herself becomingly in one of the chairs by the tea-table, but she found herself still standing, staring at the doorway, when Dick Revel came in.

The reaction was cruel; it was some time before she was able to grasp the fact that Dick himself was labouring under stress of emotion so acute that he was insensible to any sign of agitation on her part. It was only a week or so since she had last seen the boy, but he had aged visibly. His face was drawn and lined, his mouth grim, his eyes restless and morose. He tried in vain with a manner of feverish animation to appear interested in the small talk which

she manufactured while giving him a cup of tea. He said abruptly :

“ I daresay you’re wondering what’s the matter with me.”

He bent forward in his chair, elbows on knees, working his hands together, staring into the fire.

Premonition visited her like a shuddering of the soul. She experienced an effect of dissociation of spirit from body, an effect of standing without herself, a quivering, naked thing, cringing from the menace of torture, and perceiving her body quietly seated, clothed and sane, preserving an unruffled countenance informed with dignity, sympathy, and graciousness. And she heard herself say in an even tone not lacking in kindly humour :

“ Perhaps I understand, Dick, at least a little.”

“ I hoped maybe you would. That’s why I called, without asking if I might. Dad thinks such an awful lot of you——”

“ Do you think so, Dick ? ”

“ He’s said so often ; he considers you the cleverest woman he ever met. He . . .

We've always been rather open with each other, you know, talked a lot about . . . life and things . . . more like friends . . . until . . ."

" Sunday ? "

" Yes. . . ." The boy looked up sharply.

" Then he did consult you ? "

" About your wanting to marry Nelly Steele : yes."

" What—what did he say ? I don't mean that exactly : I know he said he didn't want me to marry her. What I do want to know is, how much he told you, if he said anything about making me promise to keep away from her for a fortnight while he . . . he . . ."

Dick checked on a gulp.

" Your father told me about that : yes."

" What he meant to do ? Did you understand that ? "

" I understood, perhaps, more than he told me."

" I had a notion perhaps you would."

She felt that he expected an expression of opinion, but was silent till he lost patience.

" Well : what do you think ? "

Still positively in control of her visible self, she smiled indulgently. "I haven't any right to judge others, you know, Dick."

"I know, but . . ." A cry was wrung from the boy's tormented heart: "Oh, Mrs. Lathom, I'm so unhappy! You can't know . . . nobody can. . . . We've always been such pals. And Nelly liked me, I know she liked me, and more, until . . . Now, I can't think of anything else, I can't sleep for thinking of what's happened and—what's happening—and how I can't do anything to stop it."

It was necessary to keep tight hold of herself. She knew her sympathetic expression of interest was unaltered, but felt as if the muscles of her face had suddenly become petrified; and it was not possible for her to speak without betraying herself.

With a movement of uncontrollable nervousness, Dick jumped up. "Don't you understand?" he demanded.

She nodded, bending low over her teacup.

"I can't sit still. If you don't mind my roaming round a bit while I talk . . ." Immediately he stopped short in the act of

roaming and stared at her apprehensively.

"If you don't mind my talking . . ."

"If it's any help to you, Dick, if I can help you by listening . . ."

"You don't know how much. I want your advice, too. I've got nobody else to go to for advice. A man can't talk to his friends about such things—I mean his men friends; it isn't the sort of thing you can discuss in the club or office, you know." He made a writhen grimace of deprecation. "But a fellow's got to talk to somebody or go mad."

"I quite understand." The tone robbed the formal phrase of coldness. "Please go on, tell me everything—or as much as you want to."

"When did you see Dad last?" She told him Sunday. "Then you don't know what's happened since?" She made a slight negative motion of the head. Dick plunged hands deep into his pockets and resumed his roaming. "Well: I dined with him Monday—invited myself—he couldn't well refuse. I told him I'd been thinking over the arrangement he'd suggested—that I stay away

from Nelly for two weeks, while he tried to find out something against her—and it seemed so dead wrong, so abominable, I'd decided I couldn't stand for it. He said he'd hold me to my promise. I said I wouldn't be held, I took my promise back, I was going to find Nelly and tell her everything right away. He said, All right ; I could do as I pleased : only if I affronted him that way, disregarding his wishes in addition to breaking my word, he didn't want anything more to do with me. I lost my temper and left before dinner was over. Not that I could eat anything, anyway. That night I saw Nelly at the Club de Danse."

Dick threw himself down into his chair with a movement of despair.

"What did she say ?"

"I—I didn't tell her anything. There were too many people. I tried while we were dancing, but it seemed such an inappropriate time. . . . I counted on taking her home, as I often have—thought that would be a good opportunity ; but about midnight that awful mother of hers turned up with an animal named Phyfe, a vaude-

ville actor, Nelly's former partner in a dancing act, and they made up a sort of family party, and I . . . I went away."

"But you have seen her since?"

Dick nodded gloomily: "Wednesday—yesterday evening. All day Tuesday I tried to get in touch with her, but she was out—I don't know with whom, except I think he took her to dinner."

"Your father?"

"Yes. I dropped into Sherry's for a cocktail with some fellows and caught sight of him in the lounge, waiting for somebody. I didn't stick around to see who it was, somehow I felt I couldn't stand it if it was Nelly. . . . But he was with her at the Club that night: took a party there; and she was at their table all evening. Yesterday they must have had tea together. I called at the hotel, found she wasn't in, and waited. About six he brought her to the door in his car. He went on; and when she came in, I spoke to her, asked her for a few minutes. We went into the lounge, and I tried to tell her . . ."

"Didn't you succeed?"

Dick's head sagged despondently. "It wasn't any use: she wouldn't listen. It wasn't an easy thing to talk about, and I kind of stammered, I guess, and made a mess of it. At any rate, she misunderstood something, and flared up, told me she was perfectly well able to take care of herself without my assistance, it was none of my business if she found Dad interesting to dine or go to lunch with, and I was only a boy anyway. She was nice enough, or tried to be, you know, but unreasonable; she all but told me to go to the devil—not in so many words of course. I tried to put myself right, but only managed to make things worse. At last she jumped up, told me she never wanted to see me again, and flounced out."

Dick clutched his temples between melodramatic hands and groaned aloud. "I went home and wrote to her, apologized and explained and everything—put it all before her, very clearly and politely. I said I wouldn't trouble her any more, but I thought she ought to know."

"And what was her answer?"

"There wasn't any. She sent my letter back unopened—without a word—just put it in an envelope and gave it to a messenger to bring to me."

He brooded heavily for a space and uttered the first axiom of a philosophy in the making, the first perhaps that any man ever formulates with conviction of its immortal, implacable truth: "Women are the devil!"

At once, appreciating his offence, he apologized. But Alice laughed.

"It doesn't matter, Dick. I know how you feel. . . . So are men, to women. It happens to all of us, sooner or later, to think that."

"I suppose so, but . . . Nelly. . . . If I could only make her listen to me!"

"You can't. If you could, Dick, it wouldn't do any good."

Words to frame the thoughts shaping in her mind came to her with strange fluency; she found herself surprisingly able to talk without self-consciousness, at least without conspicuous constraint. Her wretchedness was unmitigated in fact; confirmation of her fears and doubts clutched her heart like

a hand of ice ; with almost every sentence she turned a knife in her wound. Yet there was a sort of satisfaction, inexplicable, in discussing matters so intimate to her with one who could not know how nearly they touched her.

“ Women are in some ways very much like men,” she said—“ too much. The more clearly they understand danger, the more it fascinates them. If you tell this girl your father’s interest is not genuine, you pique her vanity ; she’ll go almost any length to prove you wrong by making it real to him. Convince her that he’s insincere, and still she will persist, partly to see how far he’ll go, partly to avenge her amour propre before he gets a chance to jilt her—but not till the last moment. Come between a woman and such satisfaction of her vanity and you’ll earn her lasting hatred. Be advised, Dick : stand clear ; wait.”

“ Is it fair to her not to warn her ? ”

“ Leave her alone and she’ll find out for herself. Women have an instinct denied to men, I think, that warns them in time when men are treacherous. For all that,

sometimes they disregard it. You've got to face that danger."

" You mean, Nelly might fall in love with Dad ? "

" It's possible. Other women have."

" It's unthinkable. Why, he's twenty years older——"

" Don't you know that's one of the strongest attractions he has for her ? The attentions of men of experience, men who have had your father's success with women, are the most flattering a young woman can receive. Suppose—she says to herself—I succeed where all other women have failed, in making him love me and then holding his love. What a temptation ! What a temptation for any human being ! Don't judge her too unkindly, Dick, if she proves unable to withstand it."

The boy's gesture was heavy with despair.
" You take away every hope . . . "

" It doesn't make me happy to talk to you this way, Dick, or to see you unhappy. I'm fond of you ; you're very like your father."

" And you're fond of him ? "

She inclined her head with a cool and open smile : " Of course."

" I know he's awfully fond of you. If you won't think it an impertinence . . ." Knowing what was coming, she made a sign of permission. " Sometimes I've thought Dad was in love with you."

" No, Dick : we've been good friends, that's all."

" Well, that's why I came to you. I thought, since Nelly won't have anything to do with me, perhaps you could make him listen to reason."

" Where you have failed ? Ah, no, Dick : hardly ! "

The boy's eyes grew round. " But naturally he wouldn't listen to me : I'm only his son."

" That's the reason why he would consider you before any other human being—if he meant to consider anybody but himself."

" Except the woman he loves——"

" You are mistaken. Larry loves you more than he has ever loved any woman. Wells says—and I've not heard it said before, but it's true—men don't love women as they

do their children. If you want proof of that, Dick, think how man's love for his children lasts. Let it run a normal course, and it never fails. Now with women it is otherwise."

"Why? I don't understand . . ."

"Man sees himself in his children: the reflection never fails him—even when it isn't there, he sees it, and adores the mirror that so caters to his vanity. With man no less than with woman, the touchstone is vanity."

She was pensive, and sighed when, roused by consciousness of Dick's persistent stare of wonder, she resumed: "So, you see, if Larry won't let his love for you stand in his way, he's not likely to listen to a woman he once thought he loved."

There was a pause, she sitting with a hand lifted to shade her eyes from the fire, the boy lost in contemplation of new thoughts. At length she rose and with a gesture full of charm offered him her hands.

"Will you forgive me, Dick, if I ask you to excuse me now? I'm very tired, I've had a trying day."

"You've been awfully kind to let me howl about my troubles. . . ."

"No, I was interested to hear what you had to tell me. I'm only sorry . . . I know I haven't helped. I can't. I wish I could . . . not for your sake alone, but for his, too."

"You mean, you think he won't . . . Nelly won't . . ."

"Just as you are suffering to-day, Dick, your father will suffer, presently. He's a proud man and vain. Perhaps not this time, but some day some woman is going to break his pride and humble his vanity to the dust. He won't understand, and he'll be hurt deeply, Dick, desperately. Remember that, when his time comes, and your heart is hard with the thought of how he made you suffer."

"I think," the boy said slowly, "I understand why Dad calls you the wisest woman he knows."

"It isn't true, Dick. But . . . perhaps it's true that I'm clear of vision, perhaps I have learned to recognize some bitter truths. If so, it's because I've been to the only school where lessons are lasting." She answered his stare with the one word: "Folly." Then

her effort to smile naturally nearly gave her away. "I am still learning."

The spirit that sustained her failed as she returned to her dressing-room. The philosophy that sent Dick away a little tranquillized was powerless to bolster up her waning courage. She sank abjectly into the cushions of the chaise-lounge. For a long time she remained without a move, her gaze, itself vacant, focused upon vacancy, her face dull, its muscles slack, its customary intelligence blurred by an obliterating lethargy of every faculty. Bereft, by Dick's information concerning the flirtation between Revel and Nelly Steele, of all that had spelt hope to her for nearly a year, the belief that she had Revel's love to turn to when all else failed her, she was temporarily incapable of connected thought. Through a dense grey fog of sadness that enfolded her consciousness, vague sensations of pain drifted like lost grey ghosts of thought. . . .

The fairy chime of the French gilt clock upon her dressing-table, the signal for the mellow chant of the tall clock in the entrance hall, booming the hour of seven, failed to

dispel that apathy. She had dismissed all remaining faith in Revel, and with it her intention to call him up a second time at seven.

But on the entrance of her maid she pulled herself together.

"I shant want dinner to-night," she said. "You may bring me a sandwich and a glass of milk in case I get hungry later. After that I shant need you."

The maid once out of the way, Alice rose and bestirred herself in a sudden seizure of activity. Definite purpose had taken possession of her without her knowledge, in the course of that long spell of rest in thoughtlessness, during which the processes of unconscious cerebration had proceeded without any stay, if anything with stimulated activity. She knew now, without knowing how she had arrived at the decision, that she was going away this night, going by herself, leaving no sign, to seek peace in some far place where, under an assumed name, she might, uninfluenced, consider the shards of her shattered life, perhaps scheme out some way to piece them together anew, remake the vessel of her happiness.

She would need money, and had little. The allowance she received from Frank was generous enough, but her habits had been heedlessly extravagant. On the other hand, she had much valuable jewellery. Seated at her dressing-table, packing her largest jewel-case, she descried in the mirror the movement of somebody behind her. She turned without a cry, but startled.

Frank Lathom stood drooping against one side of the doorway. Even as he appeared without warning, days in advance of the date set by him for his return, he had mysteriously managed to enter the apartment without creating any disturbance. The fact was the more strange in view of his pallor, which was deathly, his fixed and dilate eyes, the uncertain fumbling of his hands—all indications revealing too plainly to her sickened understanding that condition of advanced alcoholism whose ever more frequent recurrence had of late made life with him a hell.

She rose slowly, shuddering with disgust. Lathom lurched toward her, stumbled to his knees, and, seizing her hands, covered them

with kisses. Incoherent babblings escaped his lips. Words now and then distinguishable formed wild phrases of endearment, repentance, and fear.

In the clasp of his arms round her knees, ignoring the stricken face the man lifted imploringly to her, she stood like a woman turned to stone, with eyes of stone. A hand moved after a time, fluttering uncertainly to rest in the damp and matted hair of her husband.

I X

REVEL stood beside his desk watching Nelly Steele. His countenance was composed, even thoughtful, but in the depths of his eyes lurked an odd smile, provoked by perception of the piquant incongruity of the sober frame his office furnished for that consummately feminine figure, instinct with gentle grace in every contour and movement indicated by the suave, cool lines of her grey velvet gown.

Round her shoulders and over her bosom hung a chain of amethysts quaintly set, the work of cunning Chinese silversmiths, its tasselled ends of silver fringe swaying gently as she moved about with neither haste nor rest, with the lively inquisitiveness of a child confident in strange surroundings.

She touched the plate of heavy glass that protected the dark mahogany of his desk, examined with quick understanding glances

the mahogany letter-trays, the neat docketts of papers, the desk fittings of antique heavy brass, the excellently chosen rug, the luxurious deep chairs of leather upholstery, the several good canvases on the sage-toned walls, and ended wonderstruck at a window overlooking the lower island with its gigantesque groupings of office blocks and, beyond, the far-flung sweep of the harbour, its blue plaque furrowed by shuttling keels and blotted with plumes of steam immaculately white in the wintry air.

Aware of his silent but constant regard, she looked round with eyes of friendly confidence. And Revel reminded himself that this was Friday : a week ago last midnight he had first learned of the existence of a woman named Nelly Steele ; to-day she had journeyed down town to lunch with him at the Bankers' Club and make herself acquainted with his offices.

" I was thinking how funny it is that I, born in New York, should never before have visited the Wall Street district. . . . I suppose this is the Wall Street district ? "

He went to her side and indicated, far

below, a green plot of grass and a fore-shortened brown spire.

"Anything in the neighbourhood of Trinity is Wall Street."

"And the first time, too, I've been in a real office—I mean, except a manager's or an agent's, or a theatrical lawyer's."

"Curiously enough, now that you make me think of it, this is the first time any woman has ever been in this office—not counting my secretary—and, I presume, the char-woman who comes in after hours."

That this happened to be true failed to detract from his pleasure in communicating information of such personal interest. He was rewarded by a flash of light incredulity.

"And you have known so many attractive women . . ."

"But never before one who so interested me that I wanted her to know anything about the circumstances of my business life."

The candid blue-grey eyes held his for a moment, then looked away. She smiled faintly and sighed a little sigh of humility only half affected. "Whether you're making fun of me or not . . . I like it." She left

the window and moved toward a chair on which rested her furs. "I've enjoyed every minute. . . ."

Revel offered no objection, but took up a soft grey squirrel cape and deftly settled it upon her shoulders. The touch of his hands conveyed a nicely calculated hint of reluctance to withdraw; nevertheless they did not linger.

"Till to-morrow, then . . ."

"Yes." She began to pull on her gloves.

"What time?"

"Noon, sharp. We'll lunch at Claremont, motor out through Tuxedo to Interstate Park and Bear Mountain, down the west shore to Nyack, recross the Hudson there, and reach Forester's Inn just in time for dinner."

"It sounds delightful." She took her muff from him. "And thank you so much."

"For what? Letting you create an oasis of beauty in the drab aridity of a business day?" She laughed lightly, and turned toward the door. Revel forestalled her there, and held up with a hand on the knob. "Nelly . . ." It was the first time he had

used her given name alone ; but she seemed not to notice it. " To-morrow's a long way off . . . "

" But surely you'll come to the Club to-night——"

He offered a wry face of distaste. " With a hundred people about. . . . Couldn't we have dinner, a wee bit of a quiet dinner, by ourselves this evening ? "

" But I'm dining at the hotel with Mother and Will Phyfe."

" You can't get out of it ? "

She compressed her lips in a forbidding expression belied by mirthful eyes.

" Well, I'll see . . . "

" You mean, you really think you can——?"

" I'll give you a ring before five and let you know."

He went with her to the street, where his car, which had brought her down town, was waiting to take her home again. On his return the office seemed strangely bare.

He sat at his desk, found a paper of importance requiring immediate attention, and endeavoured to give his mind to it. But his thoughts were quick with visual memories

of her unstudied witchery as she lingered by the desk, at the window, beside the chair when he held her wrap, in a dozen other poses. . . . He put aside the paper and lighted a cigar, troubled. Was he losing his grip? Was Beau Revel to be beaten at his own game by a pretty dancing girl in no essential different from any other of her kind?

That wasn't true. He must be fair. Essentially Nelly was different. He recounted a dozen qualities, conspicuously her simplicity, her honesty, her quick intelligence, her whimsical turn of humour, her unpretending but shrewd self-valuation, that combined to distinguish her from all others.

Nevertheless she must be to him no better, no worse, no more worth serious consideration than any other. One woman more or less in his life was merely one woman more or less. . . .

Reflections leading him a way he had no wish to go, lest conscience prick the bubble of that self-esteem without which he was nothing but a weary man of middle age, unillusioned, aimless, wanting *raison d'être*.

He was successful, finally, in concentrating upon his work. But each time the telephone rang he turned to the instrument with a thrill of quickened pulses. Late in the afternoon he took up the receiver to hear a woman's voice, but not Nelly's. In conflict of surprise and disappointment, dismay and chagrin, he found himself stammering witlessly : " Why—why, Alice—is it you ? "

" Yes, Larry."

Those unapproachably sweet accents were charged with a feeling he was afraid to analyse.

" At last ! " He effected a partial recovery. " I've been wondering——"

" I tried to get you yesterday."

" Rudge told me. When you didn't call up again, I thought perhaps you had some reason for not doing so."

" I had . . . Frank came home unexpectedly." Her tone conveyed all he needed to know. " I'd like to see you, Larry, if it can be arranged. Frank's staying in bed to-day, but I told him I was dining out——"

" If I'd only known in time ! "

" Then you're engaged ? "

" Yes. But I'll try to get out of it. I must see you—of course. You've kept me on tenterhooks all week. . . ." An injudicious opening if Alice knew too much. He hurried on, giving her no chance: " Where can I call you, say about five ? "

" At home. But if it's inconvenient . . . to-morrow will do."

" Unfortunately to-morrow's impossible. I've got to run over to Philadelphia for a client. Awful nuisance."

In the act of lying, he wondered why: a simple excuse would have served as well, even better. . . . The one woman he had never lied to, to whom he had sworn never to lie . . .

" To-night, then, if you can manage it, Larry."

" If I don't telephone by five, it'll mean I can't——"

" I understand." Her voice sounded weary and sad. She said abruptly: " Good-bye."

" Wait—Alice!—I want——"

She had hung up.

He began a worried pacing to and fro, seeing himself pitilessly revealed in the guise of

liar and craven in one, the poorest creature he had ever known.

He determined, when Nelly called up, he would put her off, he would fake some excuse ; whether or not she saw through it didn't matter. He must play fair with Alice : self-respect was at stake. . . .

But Nelly thought it injudicious to break her engagement with Mother and Will Phyfe. Mother, she suggested, was a trifle difficult. Revel grasped the implication. Nelly had let herself in for domestic criticism by giving so much time to him. And no wonder. . . . He made duly sympathetic noises.

The hand that subsequently moved toward the telephone faltered. He really needed time to think before meeting Alice. The week had gone so rapidly, had been so full of Nelly, he hadn't had much time to himself. Better wait till Sunday. He had a presentiment that, after to-morrow, things would shake down into more comprehensible and negotiable shape. Besides, he could hardly face Alice with that idiotic lie on his conscience. Once its occasion had been safely consigned to the limbo of his private history, it wouldn't

matter ; he would forget it as soon as he felt sure it couldn't be raked up and exposed to his discredit.

Avoiding his clubs, he elected to dine alone, morosely, in the café-lounge of the Plaza, tête-à-tête with a newspaper. Frightfully lonesome and irking. Why had he been such a fool about Alice ? The only way to deal with nettles was to grasp them with a firm hand. No matter if it proved a bit trying, a quiet dinner with Alice would at least have advanced matters toward some sort of solution. And he wouldn't have been lonesome. He thought of Dick, whom he missed horribly, and looking up saw the boy glowering at him in the entrance from the lobby. Immediately he swung on a heel and marched out. A spasm of pain rent Revel's bosom. He conceived himself sinned against by wilful misunderstanding. By what right did this son of his question the disinterested sincerity of his motives ? Here he was, risking not only the tongue of scandal, but the one grand passion of his life, to rescue Dick from the toils of an infatuation which might have resulted ruinously—and his re-

ward, to be cut by one whom he loved better than his own life ! He propped up the newspaper for a shield between his agonized self and the eyes of an unfeeling world, and conned studiously news which, passing through eyes to brain, was eliminated without registering a trace.

Persistently his resentment of Dick's unreasonable attitude, the unsatisfactory status of his relations with Alice, his own infirmity of purpose, and his present desolation of spirit in having nobody to talk to, was confounded with resentment of the thought that Nelly was wasting the evening on that animal Phye. Having met him at the Club de Danse, Revel had any amount of justifiable excuse for disliking Phye intensely. He was not only an actor, he was too young, not over thirty at most, too good-looking and tastefully dressed, too well poised and mannered, in short too damnably unobjectionable altogether. If Nelly hadn't been able to hit it off with him in vaudeville, why the deuce was he sticking round now, with all the assurance of a friend of the family, taking up her time to the detriment of her interests ?

He tried to recall what Queenie Benzoni had said about Phyfe, but beyond a hazy impression of something acid in Queenie's tone memory was at fault.

To kill an otherwise hopeless evening he wandered over to Broadway and into the first theatre he came to. Chance gave him an aisle seat in the middle of the orchestra. During the first entr'acte he found himself the object of signals from a stage box occupied by the Benzonis, with Drummond Hale, a Mrs. Artemas whom he knew slightly, and (Revel looked again before crediting his eyes) Nora Nettleton. An ill-balanced party. He had a mental frown, then an appreciative chuckle; and going round to the box he accepted with malicious alacrity Queenie's invitation to join them later in the Crystal Room. The evening began to seem more promising. Benzoni was openly ill at ease and the Nettleton girl uncommonly quiet, almost sulky beneath surface calm.

When chance arranged to leave them alone at table while the others danced, Queenie confirmed his diagnosis.

"I'm cultivating an unholy passion for

dear Nora. Benzoni doesn't know what to make of it. The girl's wise, but too much a kid to handle the situation. I keep them together all the time, never give them a moment alone. Benzoni's already beginning to pick flaws in her; he resents hideously that she can't seem to hold her own with me, and magnifies enormously little slips due to natural embarrassment. She's furious with him for letting her in for such punishment. Two days more, and I'll have them so heartily sick they'll never forgive each other for starting this foolishness. Am I a great woman, Larry, or am I not?"

"You are a great woman, Queenie. I only wish your brain was in charge of my affairs."

"If it was, you wouldn't have so many." She met his stare with purposeful nod. "There's one, at least, I'd crab if I knew how."

He rolled prayerful eyes heavenwards and groaned: "O Lord!"

"Yes—me, too. You needn't think you can get away with anything gaudy in this tight little town without people talking.

And you needn't put on that look of injured innocence : you've got nothing of the sort in your make-up."

" I presume," Revel said with elaborate lassitude, " you've been overeating again—on your favourite dish, gossip—and are now suffering with an acute attack of moral indigestion."

" I don't know anything about morals. They cramp my style. I'm a simple-minded soul, primitive and everything : all I know is fair play. I'm talking about Nelly Steele. Everybody else is, thanks to you. Oh, it takes you, Larry, to turn a woman's head and rush her so furiously that, inside a week, the whole town sits up and takes notice."

" Aren't you exaggerating ? "

" Don't be a hypocrite."

" I mean, about Nelly's head being so easily turned."

" I didn't say anything about easily : it took you to do it. And I think it's perfectly poisonous of you."

" But if Nelly finds me amusing——"

" You know she finds you more than that."

" I'm sure you're mistaken. But assuming

she does : is that anybody's business but hers and mine ? ”

“ Look here, Larry : if I could be snubbed, I wouldn't be infesting the Ritz to-night, I'd be helping elevate the drahmah to the level of the New Amsterdam Roof on the strength of my still small voice and noble underpinning. Besides, I'm too fond of Nelly to let a little thing like a snub hinder me from fighting her battles for her.”

“ And most public-spirited of you, too.”

Their glances clashed. Perceiving the glint of mulish resentment in his eyes, the woman gave way craftily. Her look softened, she let her hand rest a moment, affectionately, on his arm.

“ Don't let's row, Larry. I'm just as fond of you as I am of Nelly, every bit. I don't want either of you made unhappy. You're such a dear—and Nelly's much too nice for you, much too nice to have life spoiled for her solely to prove you can do it once more.”

Revel found a half-smile of fatigued derision. “ So that's what you think . . . ”

“ Oh, I know well enough you tell your-

self you're doing this to save Dick from marrying an actress; but . . . Larry . . .” Queenie shook her head at him sadly: “You never yet played any game to lose.”

“I’m not thinking of losing. . . .”

“Don’t I know. But if you win this time, you’re going to break Nelly’s heart.” He made a slight sign of impatience. “Oh, not the way you mean, perhaps. I still believe the girl’s too much sensible to let it go as far as that. But if you rob her of her chance, just now when she’s making good, getting where she’s always wanted to be. . . . And you will, you know, if you go on. People aren’t going to have any use for one of your discards, apparent or real. She’ll be done for socially when you drop her. And if you let it go that far, Larry, I’ve got a hunch, and I hope to God I’m right, you’ll pay, too, for once—pay in blood and tears.”

“Not wishing me any hard luck, eh, Queenie?” Revel laughed quietly. “They’re coming back,” he added, as the floor began to be cleared of dancers at the close of a number. “Mind if I duck, old dear? I’m about fed up for to-night.”

He tried to keep his manner light, and measurably succeeded ; but resentment was hardening his heart ; it glinted frostily in his eyes and tightened grimly his lips as he shouldered through the revolving door to the Forty-fifth Street sidewalk, nodded curt refusal to a porter who ached to call him a taxi, and turned east to Madison to walk home.

Things were getting a bit too thick for passive toleration, he told himself. Opposition was a dangerous thing to offer Larry Revel at any time. The temptation to override it was, as a rule, stronger than any counsels of discretion. Queenie's impertinence (in his anger he chose to christen it that) and the implied threat that people might lose patience with him at last and refuse to overlook yet another glaring escapade, with Dick's irrational hostility and the importunate claims Alice had upon his increasingly reluctant consideration, bade fair to prove too much for him, without any more incentive to have his own way heedless of cost.

The day was not yet done with him.

Absorbed in embittered reverie, he ap-

proached the Gramercy Square apartment house in which he lodged. A man in evening dress opened the door before he could use his key, and, stepping out, glanced sharply at him, then paused. His voice was crisp. " Mr. Revel ? "

Startled out of his preoccupation, he identified the man Phyfe and instinctively squared himself on the defensive.

" Good-evening, Mr. Phyfe."

" Your valet didn't know when you'd be home. I'm in luck."

" What can I do for you ? "

" If you'll be good enough to give me two minutes of your time . . . "

" Shall we go up to my rooms ? "

" Thanks, no. What I have to say can be said here, without putting you to any more inconvenience." Taller by more than half a head, the man looked down into Revel's face, cool, collected, calculative, with even a flavour of sardonic condescension. " You may not relish what I'm about to say——"

" Then permit me to advise you not to say it."

" Sorry—I'm not altogether a free agent ;

in part, I speak for another. Mrs. Steele's much distressed on account of Nelly's interest in you—and yours in her."

"Well?"

"And I, on my part, have been in love with Nelly for years. I know I've got no chance: I know I'm only an actor; she's far too good and fine for me. But so is she for your sort." A quietly lifted hand checked Revel's hot impulse to interrupt. "I fancy you can guess about what I want to say, now, but . . . It's this: I'm going to take it upon myself to hold you personally responsible for Nelly's happiness. I haven't a shadow of right—but I'm going to. I hope you'll remember; if you do, it'll spare both of us—and others—a lot of unpleasantness. That's all. It's no good your telling me to go to hell, although you're quite justified in doing so. Good-evening, Mr. Revel."

He turned away. In a louring stare, Revel watched his tall figure swinging deliberately down the deserted sidewalk. He found himself singularly satisfied with his refusal to give that insolence the recognition of an answer. And with this feeling he was con-

scious of another, no less curious : a quieting sense of settled purpose where, five minutes ago, there had been turmoil of conflicting impulses.

He made a strange gesture, of defiance and at the same time of resignation.

X

PURSUING tirelessly its fanlike white flare of headlights, the motor-car slipped smoothly through the ebbing dusk, traversing empty and winding country roads. Of the splendour of sunset in the southwestern skies only a lake of emerald light lingered, fast draining into night. An appreciable touch of chill was added to the crisp November air. Nelly Steele stirred out of a long lapse in dreaming languor and drew her furs more closely about her. Revel sat forward and offered to put up the window in the door.

Her head made a sign of negation. "I like the air—if it isn't too cold for you."

He touched the switch controlling the interior lights, looked at the clock, shut off the illumination, and settled back into his corner.

"Quarter to six. We'll make Forester's in

fifteen minutes. Can't imagine what's got into this old bus. First time in its history it ever made a run on schedule. It must know it's carrying you."

A smile was more surmised than seen in the face softly silhouetted against the window.

"No; it's a way you have. I've noticed." Her laugh was conscious. "Heavens! I've had opportunity enough in six days! There's always a finish in the way you do things. Nothing is ever forgotten—and you think of things nobody else ever seems to. It's unusual, and it's nice."

"I'm very happy, since you're pleased."

Nelly settled her chin more cosily in its collar of fur. Revel relapsed into silent contemplation, savouring intensely the sense of intimacy imparted by their common segregation in the darkness of that small compartment whose boxlike walls of glass, steel, and upholstery, together with its unrelenting onward sweep, provided such complete insulation from all the rest of life, with its claims, its cares, distractions, annoyances. Here, for a time at least, nothing could touch them, no disturbing influences could affect them,

they were deliciously alone with their awareness of each other.

Without intention Revel sighed. The girl looked an inquiry.

"I was thinking . . . wondering what lovers did for solitude before the days of motor-cars. Then I remembered, and it made me a little sad to think I was old enough to remember what they did."

She replied with a twinkle of mischief: "So I was wrong: our thoughts were not the same."

"And yours——?"

"I'm afraid, as commonplace as you might expect. I was thinking what everybody thinks so often: what a pity, all pleasant things must end."

"I can't agree. It's our knowledge that everything must end that lends such keen relish to our pleasures. Otherwise they'd bore us to tears. Think how tragic Life would be without the hope of Death. And love——"

"Take care!" she laughed. "Leave me my illusions yet a little while. I've got blind faith in love. I'm sure, if one gave it a

chance, it could make all things delightful last for ever."

"For ever?" he mused. "A long word—in a short life."

"Not to you. I think life's not short to you, when I see you constantly worrying to invent new ways to waste it."

"Then you think one's life ought to be useful?"

"I think every life ought to be happy. All happy lives are useful, no matter what else they may be."

"You'd make a poor doctor, Nelly: your prescription calls for an ingredient most people can't find a pinch of between the cradle and the grave."

"That's because they don't know it when they see it. Happiness is everywhere for those who have the wit and the will to see it."

"Youth thinks so. Middle age knows happiness is scarce and hard to come by."

"Do you want it for nothing?" She had him now! "What value would you put on it if you didn't have to search and work for it? And do you want it to be everlasting and—'bore you to tears'?"

"You win. But . . . H'm!" That modified grunt signified thoughtfulness more than mirth. "Yes, you're right. You make me ashamed of myself. I go through life grousing—but all the while the happiest things keep happening to me. I'm absurdly happy now, for instance, to have you by my side, to think you've enjoyed the afternoon with me, that you like to be with me. I may think that, mayn't I—Nelly?"

"Yes," she admitted; "you've taught me to like to be with you. . . . I'm afraid, too much."

"How can that be—'too much'?"

"We both know it can't go on."

"And—please!—why not?"

"We'll only end by making others unhappy. We're doing that to some extent even now. You know, you've rather carried me off my feet, you haven't given me much time to think about anything but what fun it is to be with you and share your pleasure in the things you find—and make—amusing. But there are others who must be considered. I've been reminded."

"So have I." No time fitter to his purpose

than this, with Nelly in her present mood of wistful mutiny. He went on in a quiet drawl of amusement: "I don't imagine you know your mother sent the amiable Mr. Phyfe to interview me last night."

"Will Phyfe!" She started sharply and sat upright. "What about?"

"My intentions. It seems they're distrusted. Mr. Phyfe informed me that he had assumed responsibility for the conservation of your happiness, and that I would disturb it—Heaven knows how!—only at peril, so I gathered, of personal violence at his hands."

"Oh—how dared he!"

"I understood he was acting under instruction by your mother."

A-quiver with indignation, she cried impulsively: "They had no right . . . I'm so sorry, Mr. Revel!"

"Forgive me for telling you. I thought you ought to know."

"Yes," she agreed tensely—"I should think so!"

Slowly the car swung off the highway. In the gloom the ranks of parti-coloured lamps on the façade of Forester's Inn winked through

a multitude of leafless branches. With a wide sweep, the driveway brought them to the entrance. Alighting, Revel was cheered to remark an unusually large number of motor-cars in the parking space. In the warm weather that would have been nothing out of the ordinary, but at this season one was apt to find Forester's slenderly patronized, and to feel uncomfortably conspicuous in its vast dining-room. Saturday, however, was always a busy day for Post Road restaurants, regardless of the calendar.

A Saturday: Revel treated himself to a cynic smile in secret as he waited for the girl to efface the dust of motoring. The first week would not be up till midnight to-morrow. With eight days to go he had less than half—Oh, far less than half!—the distance left to cover. In fairness he owed Mr. Phyfe something handsome for showing him such a time-saving short cut. . . .

Lounging in the entrance hall, he reviewed the comfortably thronged restaurant without seeing a face he knew except those of the waiters. But waiters, as every one knows, don't count. Ignored repositories of thou-

sands of indiscreet confidences, sharing with physicians and lawyers the sacred office of confessors to society in general, but without their recognition and emoluments, for some reason the world persists in counting waiters negligible. Perhaps it is because, obedient to some unwritten code, they so seldom tell . . .

Casually Revel reminded himself that, for the first time in a year, he visited Forester's in the company of any woman but Alice Lathom. Not that it mattered. But it had been a favourite resort with them. He remembered that it was the first place they had ever stopped for tea, on the first of their little stolen excursions. At that very table, over there in the far corner, where he was to sit with Nelly Steele to-night, he had persuaded Alice of his passion, had won her first look of dawning tenderness.

He shrugged in light derision of the sentimentality that raked up a souvenir so faded and trivial. As if a road house could be sacred to his love for Alice, as if he had not for twenty years, off and on, used Forester's to entertain so many flames and lesser lights

o' love that memory flinched from the task of recalling them. . . . As well insist that one be sentimental about Fifth Avenue because one has traversed it with a sweetheart in a bus.

Sentiment, he reflected, especially sentiment about places and things, meant nothing anyway. Women, he'd noticed, were as a rule immune to its enervating influence. Men were the only true sentimentalists. Men believed in sentiment, cherished it as something ennobling, openly boasted or were proud of it in secret. Women, never—or hardly ever. Having invented it, they knew its workings too well to respect it or credit it with any human virtues. They used it and discarded it according to their needs of the moment. The practical sex, woman : so Meredith wrote.

He didn't believe Forester's Inn meant much to Alice. He inclined to question whether she would remember they had first stopped there for tea.

Admonished by conscience that he was cultivating an attitude toward Alice neither just nor magnanimous, he gave an idle

moment to examination into his secret motive. Was it possible he was already so sated with conquest that the mere promise of it was enough to quench his ardour? He winced: that explanation meant an end to all dreams of romance. Or was it merely a subconscious impulse springing from his dread of marriage? Or was there another reason, the true reason, one he preferred not to name as yet?

It was odd—annoying too—the way scruples about his treatment of Alice lurked uneasily but persistently in the back of his mind all through a dinner otherwise the most interesting he had enjoyed in many a day. Never had Forester's kitchen responded more nobly to his exacting demands. Nelly was more than ever charming. Her reaction from his account of Phyfe's officiousness exceeded Revel's confident hopes, bringing out a coquetry finished, adroit, yet apparently spontaneous, that put him on his mettle. He had no reason to believe she found his response inadequate, or that it proved less effective than its provocation. But through it all self-reproach concerning Alice persevered

like a haunting perfume that, with its deathless pressure upon senses and emotions, recalls wan ghosts of dear things dead. And so sensitive to it was he that, when they got up to go, involuntarily, against his will indeed, he scanned furtively the faces at each table, fearing to find Alice somewhere there. Entering the cloak-room to get his ulster and hat, he saw, leaving it by the door to the service bar, a man whose carriage reminded him of Frank Lathom, the more so because of a notable unsteadiness of gait. But he disappeared too quickly, and Revel was not at all anxious to have his impression confirmed. If Alice were really anywhere about, he didn't want to know it. But it was like Lathom to sneak into the service bar for a drink he didn't need and had in all likelihood promised not to take. Unhappy Alice !

Nelly never kept him waiting long. Such consideration was one of her most captivating traits. Nevertheless, it was a relief to get away.

"Eight o'clock," he told the girl as he settled into place beside her, "and an easy

hour's run to your hotel. That ought to give you plenty of time to dress and rest and get to the Club."

"The most thoughtful man I know," she replied; "an hour to dress with half an hour's rest will set me up famously for dancing. Now anybody else—as a rule I have to fight, almost, to get away with any time at all to spare."

"I want you never to regret any time you may care to give me."

"You have a way of making sure of that."

He was quiet for a moment; then in a tone half humorous, half plaintive, he asked: "And when may I hope to see you again?"

She replied quite frankly: "Whenever you wish."

"You don't mean to let Mr. Phyfe and—other people—interfere?"

"Hardly . . ."

"You make me very happy, Nelly."

"I'm glad. But there—you know—the danger lies."

"You think it dangerous for us to see so much of each other?"

"You know it is."

"Perhaps . . . but Nelly . . . it's very sweet."

She said nothing. He hung in seeming diffidence for a moment, then put out a hand to one of hers that rested outside the robe. She offered no resistance as he lifted it a little and bent his lips to it.

"My dear," breathed Beau Revel.

He heard a shout of rage and warning. With a startled cry Nelly took her hand away. In the same breath many things happened. The car swerved dangerously to the right, shook with the impact of a crashing collision, skidded and lurched sickeningly, throwing Nelly bodily into Revel's arms, and, righting, came to a dead stop.

Half dazed, Revel found himself in the road, at the chauffeur's elbow, and heard his profane complaints.

"That damned fool cut right in front of me, coming up from behind, with all the rest of the road clear—not another car in sight!"

Recalling himself with an effort, Revel discovered, a little way off to the left, a roadster resting on its side.

A man, picking himself up out of the

shadow of the overturned car, hailed them in blurred accents.

“Lendish hand, will y’? Theresh lady here . . . m’ wife . . .”

Revel shuddered: the voice of Frank Lathom . . .

X I

THE memory of the hour that followed was to abide with Revel all his days, and never to be recalled without a sense, like a mental blush, of stinging shame.

Alice had suffered a nervous shock with a severe shaking up, nothing more serious. Once helped to her feet, she walked unassisted to Revel's car and quietly took her place with Nelly in the rear seat. Lathom had sprained a wrist. His roadster was completely out of commission. Revel's had no injury to show but a fender bent and cracked. To ask the Lathoms to let him take them home was unavoidable; their acceptance was inevitable. Unquestionably, left to herself, Alice would have refused, but since refusal must involve an impossible explanation to her husband, she accepted the awkward situation with dignity.

The after-effects of her accident excused

amply her silence, but Revel knew too well it would not have been maintained with such persistence but for the discovery of his atrocious perfidy. The consciousness of his witless lie exposed lay like a naked sword between them all through that homeward ride—a sword which neither charity nor repentance could ever sheathe, which time would never dull or make weak with rust. Against this woman's love and faith he had committed the unpardonable sin. He had at least the wit to appreciate that any attempt to sue for pardon would only serve to render his offence more heinous.

If there had been a ghost of hope for Revel, Lathom would have dispelled it with his irrepressible babblings. Excitement, anger, and the pain in his wrist, added to drunkenness, did away altogether with whatever mental balance the man may have had before the accident. As incessantly as inconsecutively he talked, raved, explained, argued, ranted, threatened, lamented, and found fault. By turns he fawned on Revel, promised to sue him for damages, and reviled him for employing an incompetent

chauffeur—upon whom, of course, Lathom laid all the blame for the collision when he did not assign it to a broken steering-knuckle, to attempted interference with his driving on the part of Alice, to any and everything, in short, except the true cause. At other times he narrated a history of the evening, with all incidents leading up to its great event elaborately and tediously detailed. What Alice had said to him on this or that occasion was recited time and time again—with his scintillating retorts. His wide, violent, and unmeaning gesticulations filled the car, his breath polluted its air.

The pallid oval of Alice's face, as she rested quietly in her corner, was a flower of reproach in the sight of Revel. He tried in vain to avoid looking her way, to forget. He chafed in utterest exasperation, hopeless of relief. It was all sickening and hideous, and there was no helping matters. . . .

Piecing together fragments of Lathom's semi-coherent ravings, he perceived that there had been scant element of coincidence in the contretemps. His lie had set the stage; the love Alice entertained for him

precipitated the denouement. It appeared that Lathom, probably seeking to appease his wife and effect a show of reconciliation, had suggested motoring out into the country—"for the sake of his nerves." He had, so he averred, been overworked of late; his nerves were not all they ought to be. With reluctance, Heaven could witness how pardonable, Alice had assented. Revel surmised a pledge that he wouldn't drink exacted from Lathom, violated secretly on the first opportunity, thereafter openly disregarded. It was Alice who had suggested stopping at Forester's Inn—and despite his contention that women were exempt from the promptings of sentiment, Revel knew why. But Lathom didn't, though for some obscure reason he resented her choice and laid heavy emphasis on it by repeated and laborious essays in sarcasm.

Once Alice had got her way, he related, she hadn't been satisfied. You never could depend on a woman. Do everything in the world to please her and she wouldn't be satisfied. No sooner seated at the table than she wanted to get up and go. What

for? God only knew. No reason at all, if you asked Lathom. Ask Alice: she'd tell you the same. Jush feminine inconshishnshy. All women were like that. Leave it to Revel if it wasn't so: no matter where you looked you'd never find a sex more inconshish . . . contrarier than woman. Look at Alice: said she was hungry and wouldn't eat when a perfly good dinner was set before her. Lathom had discovered Revel and Nelly on entering, and had wanted to hail them and make it a foursome. But Alice wouldn't hear of it. Absolushy not. Acted as if she didn't know good old Larry Revel was one of the beslil ole scouts in the world. Now whaddayaknow about that?

He caught sight of the lights of a road house en passant and vigorously demanded that they stop and have a drink or two and dance. When Revel argued it was dangerous to neglect a sprained wrist, that immediate surgical attention was advisable if one were to avoid the danger of permanent injury, Lathom remembered he was suffering intensely, pitied himself, and wept.

No one ventured to speak for fear of starting him off again.

Resenting this bitterly, he started of his own accord.

Harbour beacons were never more welcome to storm-tossed mariners than the ranked globes of Fifth Avenue to Revel and the two women.

Because of the delay occasioned by the accident, Nelly thought it best to drop off at the Club and telephone her maid to fetch her costume from the hotel. It was almost necessary to use physical force to prevent Lathom from following her.

In the court of the Park Avenue apartment block he tried to insist that Revel be good fellow and come upstairs for jush one lil drink. Without a word to Revel, Alice left them to argue it out. Eventually Revel managed to break away. Re-entering the car, he stumbled over Alice's muff, and, hurrying back into the building, found the two still waiting for the elevator. He handed over the muff and in a moment of weakness ventured a "Good night."

A barely perceptible inclination of her

head gave him his congé as definitely as her response : " Good-bye."

Revel got home about ten o'clock. It had been his intention to dress and go on to the Club de Danse. He had not definitely engaged to do so : the understanding with Nelly had been merely implicit. He didn't go. By the time he had wallowed in a hot bath, inexorable fatigue claimed him. He was desperately unhappy, but he couldn't keep his eyes open. He stretched out on the living-room couch for a brief nap and woke up at half after three in the morning with a dry mouth, a heavy heart, and limbs as stiff as if from a hard day of unwonted exercise. Rudge was asleep in a chair near by. Revel woke the man and packed him off to bed, mixed himself a whisky and soda, lighted a cigarette, remembered Alice, realized his loss, and plumbed the hell appointed. Dawn, the first he had witnessed in uncounted years, found him prowling like a caged animal.

For a long time he stared unbelievably at the strange man his dressing mirror depicted to him, a man with whom he was

unacquainted, the man who was Beau Revel stripped of all the trappings of self-illusion, viewing himself for the moment with vision unfogged by the glamour of egotism.

Overnight, he conceived, it had come true, that jest with which he had for years been used to play, dreaming that it ever could be true of him no more than man dreams that Death will in the long end make him wholly a thing of naught. He saw himself at last a man of middle age.

To every man his day. Truly whom the gods love die young. . . .

He stepped closer and examined the face of this man whom he did not know and with whom he must live out his span. He found grey hairs, a scattered few above either temple, and a sprinkling of grey in the day's growth of bristles crusting chin and jowls. The skin of his face looked shrunken, he saw depressions under the cheek bones, a pinched effect round his nose, patches of brownish-yellow like a stain beneath his eyes. His colour was not what it had been, he observed a pastiness like a film over the clear flush

that had been his pride. His eyes were dull and heavy, old . . .

Despair laid hold on him then, in those still hours of the early day, and his vitals knew a chill not even whisky could counteract.

It would be hours before Rudge brought his breakfast, to be served to him in bed, at the accustomed Sunday morning time.

Sunday : a week ago his horizons had been boundless, cloudless, abrim with golden sunlight of content. To-day the skies were overcast, grey mists of melancholy pressed him close. Alice forfeited for ever, Dick estranged, the favour of his closest friends threatening to become disaffected . . . Remained a few more years of forlorn efforts to keep his head above the rising tides of time, then the slow paralysis of hope and will to live, the end of futile strugglings, the sinking, the obliteration . . .

It rained. Blurred window panes looked down upon the formal plot of the old-fashioned park within its wrought-iron palings, with its dejected trees, its winding walks deserted, its patches of discouraged grass and its bloomless flower beds, all scourged by a malig-

nant downpour. He spent the day indoors, too dispirited to dress or seek diversion of any sort. Not a soul disturbed him. The telephone was mute: neglected, forgotten, he saw himself already launched upon that long decline whose foot is lost in darkness everlasting. . . .

One thing alone was left to him : the friendship, he dared count it even more than simple friendship, of Nelly Steele.

Dwelling ever more desperately and tenderly upon this thought, Revel imagined that he loved her.

XII

MONDAY'S reaction was sharp and extreme. However dismal his day of rest, the fact that it had been one of complete physical relaxation proved beneficial. Revel was humanly a bit disappointed to find himself, as he bathed and dressed, entertaining quite a cheerful outlook. Even breakfast, normally with him a matter of form observed sketchily for the sake of coffee and the subsequent cigar, to-day had its undeniable allure. He couldn't remember when he had contemplated bacon and eggs with so much toleration.

In the middle of the morning Nelly called him up at his office to say that, contrary to their understanding, it wouldn't be necessary for her to bother him about finding something for Bert to do. Mother had taken that out of their hands; Mother had consulted Mrs. Rossiter Wade about Bert, with

the upshot that Ross Wade had undertaken to place Nelly's brother as a messenger in the private banking establishment controlled by the Wade interests. Bert was to report for duty that same morning and seemed quite keen about his new job. Nelly was free to admit she didn't think he'd last very long ; but for the present, at least, she needn't impose upon Revel's good nature.

The conversation closed with her yielding to his insistence and promising to dine with Revel that same night. He hung up, swung round in his chair, and saw a sunny smile lighting up the face of the harbour. He smiled back as sunnily. Not such a rotten old world after all: bleak winds might blow, must inevitably, but still there was sunlight in the lee of the wall. . . .

He went to meet her that evening with a doggishness in his strut and glimmering eyes not matched even by that with which he had left the Ritz after receiving Alice's first intimations of contemplated surrender, on that night so long ago . . . ten days. And Nelly met him in a mood of gentle gravity, of gladness to be with him once more tem-

pered by doubts of her wisdom in encouraging him and defying her mother's wishes, that augured as promisingly as he could desire.

Deliberately dismissing all consideration of others, ignoring every qualm of compunction and pang of self-reproach, Revel abandoned himself without a struggle to the mad, sweet sweep of an infatuation that ran its predestined course, the course he knew so well, the course that was ever new to him, with something of the rhythmic progression of a Greek drama in petto.

They met daily, often twice a day, sometimes thrice. In a single day they lunched openly at the Plaza, parted ostentatiously in its lobby, met an hour later for tea (which they hardly pretended to taste) in the mid-afternoon solitude of one of those many little "personal" French restaurants which broke out like a rash on the face of the shopping district that Winter, dined secretly in an outlying Greenwich village table d'hôte establishment which had as yet failed to catch the fancy of upper Fifth Avenue, and supped and danced with a feather-brained company at the Club de Danse till two in the morning.

Opposition was by no means wanting to steel them to their folly. Revel could hardly have wished a stouter ally than was provided by Mother's insensate badgering of Nelly. Will Phyfe, snubbed mercilessly, was eliminated, as far as the girl was concerned, as a power of active hostility ; but Mother conscripted Bert to fill the gap in the ranks ; and the pressure of Phyfe's aloof disapproval remained no less a psychic factor with Nelly than that of Dick with Revel. Rossiter Wade and offered ill-advised interference and retired crestfallen to poison the mind of his mother against the girl. A wider circle of acquaintances in common looked on with worldly amusement, preserving a pose of neutrality while reserving the right to manifest its disapprobation whenever it chose to consider its feelings sufficiently flouted.

On Wednesday morning, however, public attention was diverted by the bruiting of the season's scandal, when Georges Benzoni and Nora Nettleton kicked over the traditional efficacy of Queenie's strategy by dropping quietly out of the ken of their world in one and the same hour. Queenie's prompt

migration to Reno occasioned no surprise. But the hysterical bletherings of the Nettleton girl's mother, her threats first to horse-whip, then to shoot Benzoni on sight, her promise on second thoughts to invoke the Mann Act for his punishment, if and when apprehended, her employment of private detectives to trace the fugitives, kept all their set agog, and blessed the newspapers with a sensation to offset the slump in public support which had followed the signing of the Armistice.

For the rest of the week only those concerned most nearly attempted to keep track of Revel and Nelly Steele ; and it is doubtful if any of these guessed, much less knew, how often the two were together. There is no bond that lovers love so dearly as that of secrecy ; there's none so binding. To outwit a world in league against them and have their way without detection, unites them in close community of irresistibly delectable stealth. Even the ingrained sybarite in Revel, which under ordinary conditions would have dictated dining always in evening dress and never in public save at what he esteemed the smartest

places in town, yielded to the allure of sneaking off with Nelly to a clandestine meal, at best tolerable, in some out-of-the-way restaurant where "nobody ever went."

When, one time, he tried to tell Nelly how gracious he thought she was to submit to such conditions without complaint: "I love it," she said with her grave candour. "It's such fun. I'd go anywhere—I'd eat chop suey with you."

He told her nobody had ever paid him a prettier compliment; and he meant what he said. That was on Thursday, when Revel had ceased to pretend that the affair was anything but desperate with him: "Life or Death," he put it to himself. And it was so. An existence ungladdened by some woman's love, unanimated by love for some woman, was to him a thing without motive or excuse, unthinkable: Death in Life. To his love for Nelly Steele all other loves were as flames abashed by the noonday sun. True, he told himself as much of each successive love; while they lasted each was always very real to him, the only real passion of his life; but

now there was more ground for his feeling than ever before.

Though he had put it firmly out of mind and was keeping it in that status with the ease of the practised philanderer, the loss of Alice had cleft his spirit to the quick : a wound deep and sore and slow to heal. Never before had a woman of her quality stooped to listen to him, never before, indeed, had he known a soul of such nobility. With Alice there had passed for ever from his grasp something rare beyond hope of recapture or chance of duplication. And of this the man of keen sensibilities hidden away within the hard and polished habit of the trifler was poignantly aware.

Then, too, there lingered, rankling in suppression, the bitterness of those grey Sunday morning hours when he had faced eye to eye the accomplished fact of his middle age.

So it was not too much to say, what Revel told himself, that the love of Nelly Steele meant life or death to him. She was beautiful, she was sweet, she was in her own way unique even as Alice was in hers ; more than

all else, she was Youth. If he failed to win her love, it could mean nothing else to him than that Youth was done at last with Beau Revel.

Never in any wooing had he so exerted himself to please or dissembled his efforts so craftily. He used every resource, every stratagem and trick and wile he knew, he studied the girl as he had never studied another woman, he learned to defer to her prejudices, to anticipate her desires, forestall her whims, before she herself was conscious of them. It was Friday before he offered to kiss her.

They had dined early at l'Avignon, and then, since Nelly was dressed for the evening and there was nothing in the theatres that attracted them, nothing indeed in all the world one-half so interesting to them as their two selves, they chose to motor up the Albany Post Road to Irvington and back. Returning, the car swung into Riverside Drive at Dyckman Street. With time to spare before Nelly need appear at the Club, Revel instructed the chauffeur to drive slowly. The needle of the speed indicator dropped below the mark 15. At this pace the springs made

nothing of faults in the road : the car moved without a jar or any sound other than the thick dull purring of the motor. The night was very dark but its air was clear and still. Far below, the silent Hudson had a surface of black glass jewelled with capricious lights. Nelly indulged an abstraction not devoid of consciousness of Revel's regard. Presently she sighed and extended a hand. He touched his lips to it before enfolding it in both his own.

In a quiver of laughter she said : " You've waited nearly a week, Larry, to finish what you started when that accident occurred. Do you remember ? "

" Rather. . . . But a week isn't long to wait for a chance to kiss your hand. I knew I sometime would."

" *Did* you ? "

" Just as I know I'll sometime kiss your lips, Nelly, when you are ready. . . . "

" You think so ? "

Retaining her hand, he passed an arm over the back of the seat, so that his hand touched her farther shoulder. She turned her head slightly toward him, smiling. He felt

the drum of pulses in his throat and temples. "Nelly . . ." he whispered. He made his touch a pressure upon her shoulder. She did not resist, she gave her lips frankly, and after a moment took them away again and turned her face aside, though her head still rested on his shoulder.

In a broken voice he said : " I love you."

She made a little sign of assent, sat up and back in her corner. A hand brought from under her wrap a handkerchief with which, lightly, she touched her eyes.

" I love you, Nelly . . . "

" Yes," she said thoughtfully ; " I'm sure you do."

" And you ? " Her fingers tightened on his, but she said nothing. " Nelly . . . ? "

She said thoughtfully, he fancied a trifle sadly : " No, Larry. I'm glad you love me, but . . . I don't love you."

" But—just now——"

" I'm very fond of you, Larry. That's why I kissed you. But it wasn't love, not as I understand love."

He timed a pause. " Do you think you will, Nelly, ever . . . ? "

" I don't know . . ." She gave his fingers a last pressure, and took her hand away.

" I think it rests with you."

" How ? "

" If you don't know, Larry,"—she turned her face to him with that impulse to be fair that he found so adorable in her—" I don't either."

" You don't know—or don't want to say ? "

" I'm not sure."

He pondered, not without intuition of her mind, but reluctant to acknowledge it, and paltering lost to her the initiative. She spoke in a new voice, not hard or unfeeling, but definite with decision.

" The trouble is, Larry, I will think. I can't help it: sometimes I try, but in spite of myself . . . I've been thinking a lot of late about you and me, what it all means, why we like each other so much, and where we're going : . . . you know. . . ."

There was inquiry in his monosyllabic assent. He stared. She resumed: " It's going to go hard with us, Larry; it's been such fun, and sometimes more. It's made me happy. I've been—well, flattered. You

see, I've never known a man like you before, I mean, as well. It's made me think well of myself." A touch of tenderness crept back into her tone. "It's been very sweet . . ."

"Need it change?"

"You know it must. Neither you nor I know how to stand still. And . . . we can't go on."

"Why not, if I love you and you don't dislike me?"

"Because . . . Well, because you're not a marrying man."

He had been for some time prepared. He said heavily: "You want to get married!"

"I'll have to, I think, before I love without reserve. Perhaps that's why I've never loved anybody as yet. Oh, I've been crazy about some people for days at a time, and fond of others as I'm fond of you, perhaps not so much, but never in love."

"You puzzle me," he said. "Love is the only sacrament for love. What can marriage have to do with it?—an incantation mumbled by an overfed hypocrite in a cassock, a scrap of engraved paper on which the henchman of the political party in power scribbles

and pastes a stamp of some sort for a fee ! ”

“ What you say is true enough——”

“ Then tell me what has love to do—— ? ”

“ I can't. If I tried, I don't think I could make you understand. But with a woman of my kind marriage has everything to do with love. I know others feel differently, just as other men than you, men who haven't had your unhappy experience——”

He growled resentfully : “ Oh, I know marriage too well ! ”

“ So you see, Larry . . . don't you ? . . . why we can't go on. Not as we're going, I mean. I don't want to lose your friendship, and that would be inevitable——”

“ Inevitable ? In the name of God ! why ? ”

“ We know what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable obstacle. At least, I suppose we do. A smash-up. I don't want it to come to that with us. It needn't, if we're reasonable. And we've got to be ; we've got to give up all this that's been so jolly . . . ”

“ Unless I——”

"No, Larry. Even if you asked me to marry you, I couldn't say yes—even if I wanted to, I couldn't—not now."

He gave a gesture of resignation, and was silent for some time, brooding with sombre eyes.

The car jounced over car tracks. He saw the lights of the Plaza. In another minute . . .

"Then it's good-bye, I presume you mean it's good-bye . . . Nelly."

"Must it be more than good night? Because we realize we've got to be sensible and stop this running round together like a couple of foolish children . . . I don't see that makes it necessary to bow distantly hereafter when we meet."

He sighed deeply, then sat up and squared his shoulders.

"You're right, Nelly, I know you're right . . . the rightest girl I know, and the dearest. It seems hard, damned hard, but it's got to be as you wish." . . .

He bade her a subdued farewell at the entrance to the Club, told the chauffeur to take him to Gramercy Square, and climbed

despondently back into the car. When it turned the corner, however, he bestirred himself, consulted his cigar-case, and struck a match. The little flame ruddied a countenance by no means chapfallen. He blew out the match and lounged back, puffing, with a grunt of amusement. Funny how history would insist on repeating.

“ Friday,” he thought aloud. “ To-morrow is also a day. And then there’s Sunday . . .”

XIII

SATURDAY morning brought him a fair mood, unclouded by misgivings, hardly flawed by a flying cat's-paw of regret when he remembered he had no appointment with Nelly to fill in the day. He might, of course, see her at the Club in the evening, if he liked; but Revel entertained not the remotest intention of making any move so impolitic. It was, he told himself, only necessary now that Nelly should be made to miss him. After the last fortnight, she was sure soon to feel a little lost without that spell of blandishments which he had so cunningly woven round her. The never-failing fascination inherent in playing with fire—she would miss that, too. The conflict once begun between temptation and the instinct of self-preservation, the issue he conceived to be inevitable.

He gave her forty-eight hours, seventy-two at most . . .

In spite of the fondness for him which she had so freely owned, never before last night had he felt quite sure of Nelly. Consistently she had maintained a pose of self-reliance, based upon thorough acquaintance of the phenomena of man's love-making, which had served her like an armour of proof apparently lacking the pregnable chink. But now Revel was complacently confident. After all, the business had moved with amazing fidelity to the schedule he had laid down for it. Now it stood at its last phase, the pause which always prefaced capitulation. He could recall no successful affair of sentiment that had failed to follow much the same course, arriving invariably at a stage when it was mutually and woefully agreed that it must go no further, the two must see no more of each other, and a rupture more or less absolute was solemnly covenanted and inaugurated.

Contentedly, then, he mapped out an amusing day, and succeeded in frittering it away without a hitch. Only, he observed, his enjoyment began to pall toward night-

fall. He found a flavour of futility in the smooth unrolling of its round. The people he played and idled with were too fed up with play, they got no fun out of their pleasures, or if they did they dissembled it most ingeniously under an affectation of ennui that might be vogue but was most depressing. Now with Nelly it was never thus ; she was so frankly delighted with every minute, even though it were filled with nothing more exhilarating than the mere sense of being alive. He missed her so much that it sobered him a little, made him thoughtful. Especially at night did the sense of deprivation haunt and make him unhappy. That gnawing hunger in his heart—he hadn't counted on it at all. In spite of his faith in the immutable working of the formula, he was hideously afraid lest this prove the fatal exception, fatal since failure would be like the brutal heel of fate crushing to pulp the fingers with which he was clutching at Youth, so that he must loose his hold and abandon himself to the swift and deadly decline . . .

He woke on Sunday tormented by those fears which had riddled his sleep, and yearning

for the sound of Nelly's voice, the vision of Nelly's beauty, the solace of her friendship, with all the passion that was in him ; and it shook him like a palsy. Rudge knew evil hours that morning. When the telephone rang Revel turned to it with the tremors of lovesick twenty.

It was only Drummond Hale, wanting him for a day's motoring. Hard bitten by disappointment though he was, Revel accepted without hesitation. Only by some such diversion would he be able to hold himself in hand. If he kept his time occupied, no matter how tediously, he was safe. Left to himself, he feared, he *knew*, he must weaken and, by some move of folly, lose all, everything he stood to gain if he kept his head.

Chance was kind to him at least one way. Minor mishaps delayed the return of the party till well toward midnight. It was, in fact, twenty minutes short of twelve when he walked into his dark and lonely rooms, cursing Rudge liberally because the fellow had chosen Sunday for his night free—of all nights in the week ! Never had Revel felt less inclined to do for himself or more averse

to solitude. Not that he cared for Rudge in a social way, but he would at least have been something to abuse. The gnawing at his heart was agony . . .

He shrugged discontentedly out of his ulster and let it rest where it fell, then in his bedroom sloughed his outer garments preparatory to donning a dressing-gown. The telephone called. He went to answer, muttering profanities, and hearing Nelly's voice felt his bosom shaken by a convulsion that almost deprived him of power of coherent speech.

He gasped with difficulty: "Nelly! Is it you?"

"Larry! I'm so glad. I've been trying all day to get you——"

"I've been motoring since noon—just got in."

"I've got to see you, Larry, at once."

"Very well. Where are you?"

She replied: "No; I'll come to you. I'm not far away."

He heard a click. She had hung up.

He hurried back to his bedroom and began to climb into his clothes, trying to fit an

explanation to the emotion he had detected in Nelly's voice, an agitation which, he fancied, had a singularly impersonal note. But for that, he must have given credit to the formula. But now he wasn't so sure. Something had upset her. . . . The bell rang. He scampered down the hall in shirt and trousers to press the switch which released the lock of the front door, one flight down, and had barely managed to get into his dressing-gown when Nelly's tap sounded on the living-room door.

She was breathless, and unspeakably lovely with the pallor and the dilate eyes of restrained emotion.

"Forgive me," she panted, with a forced laugh—"silly of me—but I ran all the way."

"Where were you?"

"Just round the corner—at the flat of a girl I know in Irving Place. I've been there all evening, waiting for you to come home, calling up every few minutes. I simply had to catch you before you could get to bed."

She gave an uncertain smile of apology. He eyed her keenly, with a little sinking of the heart. His fears were justified: the

formula had nothing to do with bringing Nelly to him to-night ; there was something else. . . .

" Better take off that wrap and make yourself comfortable while you tell me what's the matter."

" I mustn't stop, of course, but . . ."

With an air of preoccupation she let him lift the squirrel cape from her shoulders. " It's Bert," she announced in a breath. " I had to see you—get your advice—before morning. Ross Wade threatens——"

" Please !" Revel begged. " What has Bert done ? "

" You don't know ? "

" How should I ? "

" I thought you were counsel for the Bank——"

" I am ; but what of that ? "

" I presumed they'd tell you first of all, if they contemplated taking action against Bert."

" I've heard nothing. I was at the office only an hour yesterday, and none of my business had to do with the Bank. If Bert has absconded——"

" You said you didn't know ! "

" You've already told me enough to excuse a guess."

" It's true. He was given some Liberty Bonds to deliver, just before noon yesterday, and disappeared. I can't think what made him do it. If he needed money so badly, he might have asked Mother or me. It was only a thousand dollars. And for that my brother became a criminal ! "

She pressed a handkerchief to her lips, stifling a nervous sob. " When he didn't come home last night, Mother worried, but I . . . Well, he's done that sort of thing so often, I thought nothing of it. He will drink too much at times, you know."

" I remember your saying something of the sort. . . ."

" Mr. Wade called this afternoon and told me. Mother was out."

" Thoughtful of Ross." Revel's look was grim. " Just what one might expect of him, too."

She nodded. " I'm afraid you're right. He pretended to want to spare us, but . . . when he made himself clear . . ."

"The damned rotter!" Revel exploded.

"Yes." The blue-grey eyes were dark pools of despair. "I thought perhaps you could tell me——"

"Don't fret about Bert. I'm not only counsel for the Bank, I'm counsel for the insurance company that went on his bond. I promise you the boy shant go to jail if the slightest extenuating circumstance can be found for him. The chances are, I fancy, he met somebody he knew, on his way to deliver the bonds, and stopped to have a drink—with the usual result. He's probably sobering up to-day, and keeping out of the way because he doesn't feel like taking a home scolding. I'll be surprised if he doesn't turn up to-morrow morning with the bonds and some cock-and-bull story, and try to hold on to his job in spite of everything. I can't promise he'll get away with that, however."

"But you don't—you don't think Bert's a thief?"

Revel smiled indulgently. "Not *your* brother, Nelly."

"I'm so glad! Larry, you're the most comforting man alive—and the kindest."

"I begged you long ago, Nelly—remember?—never to call me kind. I'm not inhuman: everything I do is tainted with self-interest. I almost wish some real trouble had brought you to me, serious enough to demand real exertion of me, so I might earn your gratitude and . . . more."

"Gratitude," she said slowly, "doesn't make one love, Larry."

"It sometimes gives an excellent imitation. Give me that—even the imitation—and I'll take my chances of making it real and lasting."

She gazed thoughtfully down at a forefinger that traced a pattern on the top of the table by which she was standing. "You would lose," she said in a voice almost of regret. "Much as I like you, Larry—and that's very much indeed—it would take more than gratitude to make me love you as you want to be loved." Sensible of dangerous ground, she shifted sharply. "As for trouble—I'm afraid it's real enough, aside from Bert. Not that I expect to suffer materially, there's always a place for me on the stage, but it breaks my heart to give up the Club. . . ."

“ You mean to say Wade was as rotten as that ? ”

“ He has made it impossible, I’m afraid. And even if I were willing to overlook things and go on, he wouldn’t be, and his mother wouldn’t. She’s been getting more and more unpleasant of late, partly, I fancy, because I was slighting Wade for you. Now, when I can never permit him to speak to me again . . . ” She had a hopeless shrug. “ It’s all over.”

Revel ground a fist into a palm. “ Damn Wade! And damn me, too! Yes,”—he overrode her sign of protest—“ I’ve done my part in making things impossible for you. If I hadn’t fallen in love with you, paid you such conspicuous attentions, Wade would never have dared to think . . . Oh, I ought to be shot ! ”

“ Please, Larry! You’re not to blame alone. I did my part, too, you know. Oh yes, I did. I’m no child, Larry: I knew what I was doing when I encouraged you, what I was risking—yes, and how it must end.” Her eyes held a pitiful little smile. “ I’ve been a bad girl, Larry . . . and now I must pay.”

“ Don’t call yourself stupid names——”

“ But it’s true : I haven’t played fair. I tell you, I knew what I was doing, all along—knew I must make you unhappy in the long run, and still led you on. . . . And making people unhappy is the greatest wickedness I know.”

“ But——”

Of a sudden, interrupted by the chiming of a tall old clock in the corner of the room, Revel checked, and was silent, staring at the timepiece till the musical notes had died away.

Sunday midnight, and Nelly was with him, alone in his rooms : surely now if ever Fate was playing trumps into his hands. In this troubled and chastened mood, he reckoned, it would need a single impulse of sympathy, pity, or regret, such as might be inspired by some suggestion of nobility in him, to bring her unresisting to his arms.

He went abruptly to the windows that overlooked the Park and drew down the shades. “ Forgive me,” he explained : “ I forgot, people across the street can look right in.”

"They can't see well enough to know who I am. And—of course—I must go now."

"Yes : you must." But he made no move to help her with her wrap. "No ; one minute more or less won't matter ; I want to tell you something. . . ." She paused in an expectant stare. He had a troubled look, a gesture of resignation, and spoke with a drooping head. "Nelly . . . perhaps you'll never speak to me again, but I've got to tell you. . . . Your honesty . . . You shant share the blame for what was my fault alone. You'd have no cause for one qualm of regret if in the first instance I hadn't been a cad, a hopeless cad, as rotten as Ross . . . worse . . ."

"Larry ! What are you saying ?"

"The truth—for once—to the one woman who ever got it out of me. It never occurred to me to feel ashamed of lying to a woman before, but to you . . ." His hands lifted and fell with palms exposed, indicating surrender to a force stronger than himself. "Nelly : two weeks ago to-night Dick told me he loved and wanted to marry you. I

set myself against his wish. I told him no woman of the stage could possibly be a woman my son ought to marry. When he protested, I offered to prove it. I got his promise not to see you for two weeks, then promised him in turn that by to-night at midnight I'd have you here with me alone. I set deliberately about making my word good. If you hadn't been the fairest, squarest, honestest girl I've ever known, if you hadn't shamed me out of it, I'd 've gone through with it without a minute's compunction. You saved yourself, because you were—you. You know I never once suggested that you come here under any circumstance. Chance alone to-night . . ."

He could not endure her eyes. He looked away and hung his head. "Now you know what a contemptible thing I am. . . ."

"But why?" There was a deep note of bewilderment and disrelish in her voice. "Why do you tell me this?"

"Because I love you. . . ."

"Love makes you wish to offend me?"

"No—but rather offend you than hold any measure of your good opinion when I'm

unworthy. I love you so much, I can't stand the thought of the lie between us."

"There was none, Larry." Her smile was rueful. "I wasn't altogether taken in, you know. Subconsciously, I think, I knew. I remember, when Dick tried to tell me, I flew into a rage, wouldn't listen to him—because I didn't want to know the truth just then, because it would have hurt my vanity and—spoiled all the fun. But, deep down, I knew you weren't sincere, that you couldn't be with me when you never had been with any woman."

"Nelly!"

"You know it's true. And, oh Larry! what a pity, that a man like you, whom so many have loved, have yourself never known real love, and never can, because you've always played a game with it, until now you can't be sure that even what you feel yourself is real, or just mechanical response to moves and combinations which could get no other response, in a game you know too well!"

The truth struck home with the force of a physical blow. Staggered, he groped for

words, and groped in vain for any that would refute her. "It isn't true," he mumbled.

She shook her head sadly, and took up her cape.

"Don't judge yourself too harshly, Larry. You've done me no harm, and you've been consistent, true to the self you chose to be, long ago, when the choice was still yours, whether to be sincere with love or subtle. No one can blame you for choosing as you did: love isn't always kind and fair, even to those who play the game straight."

"God knows it's not. . . ."

"So now, it's—in spite of ourselves—at last, Larry—good-bye." He stared with sickened eyes at the hand she offered. "You're not cross with me, Larry, for saying what I have?"

"No." He had a broken laugh. "I love you too much. Nothing you can say to me can change that or make me angry. You must have loved me a little to learn to know me so well."

"A little, perhaps. But a little isn't much."

"Enough for a beginning." He caught her hand and crushed it between his own. "Oh, I can't let you go," he cried—"I can't!" All that there was in him of earnestness, of passion and persuasion, came out in his voice and eyes. "Nelly: I told you the truth, to-night, to my own cost—it wasn't easy, for I knew the cost—because I loved you. I tell you the truth now when I tell you I can't conceive of life without your love: I want you to be my wife."

Doubt flickered in her look. "Not truly, Larry?"

"I mean it with all my heart, and not all my heart alone but all of me. Will you marry me?"

He trembled for her answer. In her eyes doubt fought hard, but yielded, giving way to a smile of faith and tenderness. Warmer colour suffused her face. Her lashes drooped, then lifted that her gaze might probe deep into his. She whispered "Yes." Imperceptibly she swayed toward him. He cried out her name and caught her in his arms.

The bell rang when their lips had not yet touched. Alarmed, they started apart.

The bell rang again. The girl frowned an inquiry. Revel shook his head, then knew a shock of intuition. "Dick!" he breathed, aghast. "This is the night. He's come to see . . . He mustn't find you here." He caught her cape and sought to place it on her shoulders. She did not stir. "Why not?" she asked, "If I'm to be your wife . . ."

"For that very reason. I promised not to oppose his marrying you if I failed to have you here with me to-night. Can we let him think the reason why he must not marry you is a reason why I must?"

The bell shrilled impatiently to a prolonged pressure.

"Come down the hall—this way." He led her by the hand to a door opening on the public hall in the back of the apartment. "I'll let him in the front way. When you hear our voices, slip out and go home. I'll call you up first thing in the morning."

The bell buzzed angrily as they kissed in haste. Revel murmured a good-night, pressed the switch button, and hastened back to the living-room. Already he could hear the sounds of some one taking the steps two

at a time. He opened the door and stood waiting, lids heavy on his eyes, a hand shielding a yawn. Dick emerged from the darkness of the hall, strode in, stopped short, staring fixedly at Revel with smouldering eyes in a set white face, and with his own hand shut the door.

"Well, Dick, this is a surprise!"

"So I imagine." Dick's glance raked the room. "Where is she?"

Revel betrayed mild perplexity: "Where's who?"

"Nelly——"

Revel made his eyes round. "How should I know?"

The boy had a struggle with his temper. "You were to have her here," he said between his teeth. "The fortnight's up to-night."

"Oh-h!" Revel used the rising inflection of enlightenment. "My dear boy!" he chuckled, strolling to the table and helping himself from the cigarette casket, "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Do you expect me to believe you? How could you forget——?"



" Because I gave up days ago all thought of what you have in mind."

" Why ? "

" You were right about the girl. I found it out, and naturally . . ."

" Naturally you wouldn't tell me, when you knew I was waiting, suffering——! "

" Dear boy : how could I ? You were acting like a pettish little fool. You refused to speak to me in public, or to come near me."

" But you did convince yourself Nelly was all right ? "

" I've said so."

" Then there's no reason why I shouldn't marry Nelly ? "

" None I know of—if she'll have you."

In uncontrollable rage the boy dashed hat and stick into a corner.

" You liar ! " he cried. " Don't you suppose I know she's here ? "

" Why, Dick ! you're mad."

" She's in this flat this minute——"

Revel dropped wearily into a chair. " Look for yourself," he said, fatigued.

" I'm not fool enough. If you're willing to have me look, it's because you've let her

out the back way. I tell you, I saw her come in. I was watching—first you, then Nelly : an assignation, if ever there was one. I watched from the other side of the way and saw her talking to you before you thought to pull down the shades. In the name of reason ! why must you lie to me ? ”

“ A man,” Revel explained gravely, “ may use any method he thinks best to protect the reputation of his future wife.”

“ What ! ”

Dick’s pallor faded to ghastliness : his eyes held a blaze like madness.

“ Nelly has promised to marry me,” Revel told him quietly.

For an instant Dick stared as if at an utter stranger.

“ You are impossible ! ” He fell into a chair and clamped his temples between the heels of his hands. “ I *can’t* understand you.”

Revel got up and dropped a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “ Take it easy, dear boy,” he begged. “ I know it seems hard——”

“ Please take your hand away. It offends me. You disgust me.” With a start of resentment Revel turned back toward his

chair. The boy jumped up. "What right," he demanded violently—"what *right* had you to do this to me?"

"I thought I was acting for the best——"

"The same damn', snivelling excuse! Good God! What right had you to think or do anything unless you *knew*, when it meant so much to me?"

"I thought I was justified——"

"Why?"

"As your father——"

"As my father you thought you had a right to wreck my life's happiness!"

"In the judgment of riper experience than you could possibly have——"

"How did you get it, this famous 'judgment of riper experience'?" Revel blinked, without guard against this unexpected flank attack. "Did you get it by standing aside and letting your father—or anybody else—live your life for you? Have I no right to gain 'judgment of riper experience' by living my own life? You may know more than I do, but it's only because you've lived more, and acquired your experience as you went along—not at second hand, either. You

had no right . . . Oh, it's not you alone : the whole damn' system's wrong, unfair, unjust, cruel, that lets a father meddle with his children's lives, guide them, repress them, till they aren't worth the living. What if I had made a mistake and suffered for it ? At least it would have been my mistake, not yours, that put me into this hell. I'd have nobody to blame but myself, I'd still have a father I could look to up and love, instead of one whom I must despise because he's cheated me out of the biggest thing my life has ever known—cheated and taken it to himself ! ”

The boy's voice broke in sobs. Revel gave a gesture of despair. With a low cry of pain Dick picked up his hat and stick.

“ I warned you, however it turned out, I'd never forgive you . . . I won't.” He went as far as the door, then flung passionately back. “ See here : do you suppose you've got one vestige of a sense of fair play left in you ? ”

“ I think so,” Revel said dully. “ What of it ? ”

“ This : two weeks ago you said to me, ‘ Stand aside because I'm your father ; let me

prove to you Nelly Steele's not good enough for you, that I can make her my mistress——'"

" Dick ! "

" That's what it amounted to—and that's what's happened——"

" No ! "

" Oh, perhaps not in fact, but in intention. . . . She was here to-night——"

" She came here because her brother was in trouble, to seek my aid and advice."

" Perhaps. It doesn't matter why she came, but only that she did come to you, at midnight, alone. That shows how matters stand between you. And you did it all in two weeks—just as you boasted you could ! Well, if you could, why can't I ? "

" What are you saying ? "

" You owe me my chance. You took it away from me without any excuse. Now, if you're half the man and the sportsman you pretend to be, give it back to me. I let you persuade me to clear the field for you. Now do the same by me : you step aside for two weeks and let me have my innings. Perhaps I can win her back. . . . Well : what do you say ? "

" You aren't serious, Dick ? "

" It's Life or Death with me."

Inaudibly Revel's lips repeated the words :
" Life or Death " — the very phrase he had been saying over and over again to himself. What he had suffered, fearing lest he lose Nelly, Dick was suffering now. An acute pain seared his heart.

" Well : are you game ? Will you give me my innings ? "

In a dull stare Revel apprehended the insolent genius of Youth that alone could conceive and empower a demand so bizarre, so exorbitant, so incredible. And in the same moment, though Nelly's promise still echoed in his hearing, though Nelly's kiss still was warm upon his lips, he was chilled by a recurrent vision of that man whom his glass had revealed to him last Sunday morning, that grey, bleak thing into which Beau Revel was merging, that cold cliché of middle age.

" You ask the impossible."

" Why ? "

" Nelly has already said she would be my wife. I could hardly . . ."

" Why not ? You've only got to pretend

a business matter calls you away from town for a fortnight. I don't ask you to do anything more. I don't even ask you to beg Nelly to forgive me and forget I said things that angered her. I don't ask anything but a chance, a fighting chance to win back what you've stolen from me—yes, stolen!—under a pretence of taking a father's loving interest in my welfare. I want my chance back, I've got a right to it. Will you give it?"

"No."

"Then you're afraid I might win!"

"Yes; I am afraid. I dare not. It means too much to me. I might . . . yes . . . lose."

"Then you lied to me again—when you said you'd satisfied yourself Nelly was good enough to be my wife. If you had any faith in her—the faith a man ought to have in the woman he asks to marry him—you wouldn't be afraid she'd fall for another man inside of fourteen days! You can't trust her—but you want her for yourself!"

Rage welled in Revel. He could have struck the boy in the face. Before he could move to execute that impulse, he felt his rage

subsiding. The enervation of a great fatigue dragged upon his spirit.

"I will not argue with you," he said listlessly. "You will not understand, you can't. . . . I love her."

"Ah-h!" In the incoherence of disdain, maddened by disappointment, the boy snarled like a beast.

"That is not true."

Upon the utterance of those words, in the voice of Nelly Steele, the tension snapped. Thunderstruck, the two men turned to face her. Dick, trembling and unstrung, gave a low cry of despair. Revel had a leaden heart as he saw, in this woman who stood regarding him with unimpassioned countenance, her eyes level and dark with thought, another woman than the one whom he had known, a Nelly Steele whose very existence had never been suspected by him, a woman in whom pride of spirit burned like a strong white flame.

"You do not love me," she said deliberately. "You've never loved me. You've never loved any woman. You don't even love Dick."

“ Nelly ! you don’t know what you’re saying ! ”

“ Ah, but I do. I’m telling you the truth, Larry—the truth I’ve just learned. You don’t love me : you love only the picture of yourself in love. So it has been with all the other women—and partly that’s why you lost them. It is so with your love for Dick—whom you have lost. And me—you have lost me, too, because you loved the thought of yourself being in love with me to the exclusion of loving me altogether. Why, Larry, you don’t even *know* me ! ”

His lips moved to frame a contradiction, but her eyes abashed him. He had neither the effrontery nor the wit to deny the truth of what she said.

“ You know me so little you couldn’t trust me. Dick was right. Or perhaps it is more true to say, you knew yourself too well to trust me. You felt, if you did not consciously put the feeling into words, that this love of yours for me was too poor a thing to inspire an enduring love in response. You dared not put it to the test. You were right. I don’t love you, Larry. I thought I did, in a way,

for a moment, but I, too, was self-deluded : I loved the thought of myself being loved and married to Laurence Revel—only that.”

Revel carried his hand to his eyes as if to shield them from the light of hers. “ You are killing me,” he mumbled.

“ With the truth ? . . . Forgive me,” she said. “ I should have gone when you told me to. But I’m not sorry. I know now, I’ve been making a great mistake. I’ve undervalued myself blindly.”

She hesitated with an ironic smile, then went on : “ I’ve always thought I wasn’t anything much—just ‘ a woman,’ as you say, ‘ of the stage ’—because I put aside things precious to me so I might make a good marriage—I mean, to money and position. I schemed deliberately to make that kind of marriage, and I’d probably have made it with you, Larry, unless your heart failed you when you realized you’d asked ‘ a woman of the stage ’ to wear your name ! ”

“ Please ! ” Revel interjected, with an imploring hand.

“ No : let me finish. I never meant to marry Dick, though I was very fond of him,

and if you hadn't interfered—I don't know, I might have. . . . But you or Dick—with either I'd have played fair, given all the love I had to give and none to anybody else. But that was before I realized you looked upon woman as a sort of chattel whose sex makes her valuable enough to be a stake in a wager. Even when you told me, a while ago, Larry, I didn't think what an indecent thing it was, your attitude toward woman in general, toward me in particular. I can't tell you how glad I am to know what I've escaped. After this I'll be content with the love of the one decent man I know, even if he is an actor. I'm going to marry Will Phyfe as soon as we can get a licence, and I'm going to be glad, glad I'm marrying a man of my own sort. . . . For even if the theatre isn't your world, it isn't such a bad shop, and even if I'm only an actress, I'm too good, I'm far too good for such a man as you."

She went to the door. Revel started forward as if to detain her. One look stopped him like a blow. The door closed.

Conscious of Dick's stare but unable to

meet it, he sank slackly into a chair and shaded his face with his hands. After some time Dick, saying no word, crossed to the door, and went out. Muffled on the stairs, his footfalls, in the stillness of that hour, rang sharply on the sidewalk till he turned the corner.

XIV

TO him who has the love of cities there is in all the world no walk so prodigal of wonder and reward ; but never is Fifth Avenue more entrancing than on a winter's evening when, under a suave still sky, an early twilight, blue and wistful, trembles in apprehension of swift extinction in milky lamp-glow, while afoot on sidewalks walled with golden windows and in motors shoulder-ing from kerb to kerb, in twin currents opposed yet confused, faltering yet resist-less, the life-blood of the town runs by like ardent wine. . . .

Revel walked rapidly, threading the press with the readiness of habit, his head high, perhaps a hint of challenge in his eye, his heart desolate and sick with a sense of irreparable dissociation from all that for so long had meant so much. He saw no one whom

he knew, or who saw him. Familiar faces passed him by without a sign; whether through inadvertence or design, when his gaze sought theirs they were looking the other way. Whatever the cause, the fact was ominous. Queenie's warning sounded in his memory like a knell. Had he at last transgressed too far? Or was it merely that he had been out of town too long, nursing his stricken heart in hiding? In such a little while will Town, as fickle as it is fascinating, forget. His return to-day excited in its acute and vivid consciousness never a stir of reminiscence; he who had fallen out was so soon. . . nobody.

Notwithstanding, he showed few signs of change but in his haunted eyes. His person was as ever admirably clothed and carried. None but he knew the aching emptiness of his heart. But the Avenue turned him a shoulder of such indifference that he felt himself no better than some unquiet spirit lingering on in ways of life ever oblivious of the yearning dead.

What was most galling, he might easily

have spared himself this ordeal. But at Forty-second Street inexorable impulse had turned him to walk up the Avenue in its gloaming . . . in the hope of seeing Nelly Steele.

Hope dies so hard. . . .

Repenting his weakness, he sought to atone for it by studiously disregarding that sea of faces which surged ceaselessly toward him—faces pretty and plain, gross, delicate, keen, obtuse, hungry, satiate, flushed and pallid, one and all prepossessed with passions private and inscrutable ; faces that showed at a distance as masks without features, mere fleshy blurs moving slowly but gaining momentum as they drew near, step by step taking on contour, expression, individuality, colouring, kaleidoscopic in the play of tinted window lights and cool blue shadow, till at length they swept blindly by . . . driven wavelets on a river of souls. . . .

Now he had no more wish to meet Nelly. He was ashamed. She would guess too well his only excuse walking that way. He cringed from the thought of her eyes of scorn. And of a sudden he determined to

cross over and continue on Madison Avenue—where nobody ever walks.

At Fiftieth Street he waited on the kerb for a break in the race of motor traffic. A block in the next down-town corner caused passing cars to back up like logs in a river jam. Directly opposite him a taxi stopped. He glanced idly in through its window, and saw Alice Lathom sitting there alone.

Her face, framed in dark furs, gleamed like a windflower under a hedge at dusk. At her waist red roses burned. White gloved hands were folded in her lap. She did not stir, from the first her eyes were steadfast to his.

In that shock of recognition he winced and paled, and his bosom was oppressed by a swift, thick welling of emotion. His hand moved with a mechanical gesture to his hat.

He felt her hesitation. Then she bowed, with the shadow of a civil smile inclined her head a little, in a salute as cool, as impersonal as she might have given a tradesman.

The jam broke, the cab moved on—left him standing, staring, hat in hand. A man

behind him trod impatiently on his heels. He moved aside with a muttered "Sorry," stepped back, and instinctively resumed his rapid stride, the stricken eyes in his set face fixed on remote nothingness.

There had been no pity in her look, no compassion, no regret. There had not even been reproach.

Passers-by were staring. He stared back resentfully, then with heated cheeks put on his hat.

Curtains of a deeper twilight dropped softly from high, proud cornices. Windows took on a warmer hue. Here and there a motor-car opened sleepy, yellow eyes.

In those few ruinous weeks he had become a stranger to her, less than a stranger outside her world.

And in spite of his infatuation for Nelly Steele, that would not die and give him peace—he knew it now—he still loved Alice. The two passions were not incompatible. He craved Nelly, he desired her with a desperate intensity that hurt like hell. That way only might his scotched vanity be made whole. But through Alice alone, through her

love that had been his, could he save his soul alive.

Mysteriously, without a sound, endless chains of twin lamps became incandescent pearls, making radiant the street and dark the sky.

He pictured to himself in intimate detail that hour in the crowded little vestibule of the Ritz: the gracious gestures of women exquisitely groomed, the rumour of sweet, clear voices, sensuous whiffs of scent, the restless yet unhurried shifting of groups, the inescapable sense of the comeliness of life . . . the woman he loved meeting there, no doubt, another man for tea . . .

At the Plaza the sky grew wide, and golden rectangles in towering hotel blocks gave a singing accent to the blue of the deep and windless vault.

Over the Park a violet haze hung like wood-smoke.

Up that almost unbroken sidewalk that runs over against the mansions of the envied he swung blindly on, vaguely sensitive to an atmosphere apart from that of the lower Avenue, to a smug tranquillity exhaled by

those solid and sedate residences that affect so blandly to ignore the streams of motor-cars and buses that barge and blare beneath their austere noses.

Out of his profound abstraction he gave an impassioned gesture. Those roses at her waist . . . their significance was maddening . . . maddening . . .

Somewhere above Seventy-second Street annoyance with himself began to work as counter-irritant : the complexion of his mood became less angry and inflamed with mutiny, more melancholy in false resignation. Turning in at the Seventy-ninth Street entrance to Central Park, he walked more slowly, heavily, with a hanging head.

His aimless wanderings took him through that bowered walk called Lover's Lane ; and he remarked, in a phase of cynic humour fugitively gratifying, the irony of its emptiness, with its forlorn and leafless trees sketching gestures of uncouth misery against a formless sky.

Later he paused on the stone terrace of that mock mediæval monstrosity they call the Belvedere, and stood in a stare of sheer

surprise provoked by a vista of magic loveliness. Never in his memory had the Park worn any aspect so bewitching.

Was it true, then, that suffering was needed to make the senses quick to beauty in familiar scenes ?

The haze hung close in looping reefs, lilac and taupe and faded rose, disguising every distance and lending pensive charm to all it touched : robing tenderly the nakedness of trees, enhancing the green that lingered on the lawns, wreathing with a dusty nimbus each lamp that sentinelled the winding ways, brimming all the hollows with mist of dreams, Against a sky of jade, clouded yet cloudless, toward the horizon banded with red-gold and mauve, loomed fairy turrets of pearl-grey shadow, innocent of any likeness to the Museum of Natural History, and all around rose broken cliffs of purple bright with amber bosses. Far away, on the unseen scaffolding of the Columbus Avenue L, a train like a jewelled snake crawled toward Eighty-first Street Station. In the south, luminous sky signs flared and faded under the closing draperies of night. Northward, beyond the

opalescent reservoirs where the soft grey plume of the Catskill aqueduct plays, Harlem drowsed and droned in a smoky shroud. In the air there was no stir at all, and a strange hush brooded, superimposed upon the city roar, profaned not even by those motor-cars that, like victims of some weird infatuation, restlessly pursued one another over the sweeping drives . . . dull-eyed monsters toiling in enchanted silence.

The sadness of it, that such beauty might not be viewed without a thrill of pain . . .

In envious fascination his interest fastened upon that endless chain of cars, imagining each a shelter for lovers hand in hand or, emboldened by the deepening dark, embracing ; Nelly, perhaps, with her husband ; Dick, it might be, finding solace with another. . . . And fancy conjured up a muted rumour of fond sighs and whispers, sacred pledges kiss broken in the act of utterance.

While he was but a looker on, alone, lonely, unloved, lovelorn . . .

Slowly it came home to him that Love was no more. His sacrilege had slain it, and its passing had been as the drawing of a sigh.

Remained agony of longing, the deep hurt
of need relentlessly denied.

Envisaging a future without love, a look
of terror filled his eyes.

In even Death was there an end ? . . .

THE
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TANNEHILL

SENTIMENTALISM we have always with us, a poor thing, common and as unlovely as the meanest roadside weed. True sentiment is only where one finds it, which is often in the most unlikely places : shy and unpretending, but stubborn, once it roots grasp soil, however arid and barren, it fights hard for life.

So, we are told, the desert knows plants that, growing in loneliness, unprized, unseen, strive long years against pitiless adversity, then on a day, at the urge of some impulse secret and inscrutable, flower suddenly in blooms of the strangest beauty, and forthwith die. . . .

I

AS the lamp-fringed canopy of the Waldorf drifted astern, Margie stripped off a glove, groped for Tannehill's hand, and sighed contentedly, nestling intimately to him. He suffered the caress as a matter of course, staring out of the window in taciturn humour, his head wreathed in a light haze of cigar smoke.

The taxi-cab swung northward on Fifth Avenue between parallel ranks of lights that spent their pearly incandescence on neglected sidewalks. The night was sharp with frost, but the two healthy animals in the cab, snug in their furs and well fortified with food and drink, knew nothing of the cold.

"Some dinner," Margie murmured, squeezing Tannehill's fingers. "When it comes to ordering eats, dearie, they've got to hand it to you."

Tannehill made a noise of acknowledg-

ment—"Mm-mmm"—and continued in a preoccupation into which he had been plunged during dinner by a remotely reminiscent strain in some modern selection played by the orchestra. Indefinable discontent troubled him, stirring up emotions formless yet insistent. He was fond of music and plumed himself on his knowledge of the art of dining. It was annoying to have anything mar that carnal satisfaction which should be the sequel to a meal well chosen. It was more annoying to be unable to fix positively what it was in the music that had stirred up this disquietude. He had learned intensely to dislike being mystified. . . .

When the cab crossed Forty-second Street, Margie in turn became uneasy.

"Where'd you tell him to go, Bob?" she asked drowsily.

"Home."

The girl sat up sharply.

"Home!" she echoed in shrill protest.

"Why, I thought you said we'd take in the *Midnight Frolic*."

"No," Tannehill replied without emotion ;

" what I said was, I've got to meet a man I promised to take to the *Frolic*."

" Who ? "

" Nobody you know—buyer from out of town."

" Well, why can't I go too ? Let's give Tess a ring and make it a foursome."

" This man's got his wife with him."

" Oh ! "

Apparently the excuse was adequate. Margie relaxed on Tannehill's shoulder. None the less she felt somewhat annoyed. She had drunk enough to ripen her inclinations for what she called a party, and the prospect of being left at her door was distinctly hateful. She grumbled mentally till resentment hardened into suspicion.

" Funny buyer, bringing his *legit* to town with him," she commented darkly. " I bet you're rushing another Jane to the *Frolic*. If you are and I get wise—look out. That's all I've got to say—look out."

" All right," Tannehill assented with such complete apathy that the girl's temper expired in a gasp.

After all, she could hardly afford to row

with him, what with winter coming on and the show business on the blink, and everything. . . .

Tannehill mouthed his cigar and pursued unavailing efforts to link up some elusive emotion with the tune that kept running through his head. What the devil was in it to start up in him this inarticulate hankering? He tried to hum the refrain. Its swing was clear and melodious in memory, but with all his passion for music he had no ear whatever for the intonations of his own voice.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Margie inquired in all sincerity.

Tannehill smiled: "Yes—I guess so."

The cab stopped. Tannehill got out, lent Margie a hand, paid off the driver, and turned to find the girl waiting on the steps.

"Well," he said, touching the brim of his hat, "good-night."

In a rasping voice she demanded: "Ain't you coming up to finish your smoke?"

"No, thanks," said Tannehill. "I've just got time to walk to the theatre. I feel like a walk to-night."

Margie snorted, flung into the vestibule, slammed the door.

The tune haunted Tannehill across Eighth Avenue and all the way down Broadway. With half an hour to spare and only half a mile to go, he turned up his fur collar, dug both hands deep into his overcoat pockets, and prowled at leisure: a middle-aged man of substance with a well-modelled face of forceful and intelligent cast. Women who sighted his silk hat from afar had hopeful glances ready for him—women drifting singly and in couples, apparently unconcerned with the cold, though few were adequately clothed against that searching wind.

But Tannehill to-night was blind to the wistful promise of weary eyes, however lovely their allure.

That wretched little tune gave him not a minute's ease.

Arriving at the Palace Theatre with twenty minutes to spare, he settled to wait for his guests on one side of the outer lobby, whose garish spaciousness had that bleak effect peculiar to theatre lobbies during and especially towards the close of a performance.

The next several minutes saw perhaps a dozen other people straggle in and plant themselves expectantly round the walls, their business presumably the same as Tannehill's. He paid them no attention, obsessed as he was by that elusive little tune.

Under his perplexed and absent gaze the Broadway of Longacre Square unreeled its nightly pageant of vacant-faced, anxious women, mostly under size, under-nourished and over-dressed; and waspy men, beak nosed, with crafty little eyes and loose mouths, their belted overcoats fitting so abominably well that many gaped indiscreetly at the back. These were the fixed, if restless, population of the quarter. At certain hours their number was swollen by a rushing flood of pleasure seekers, when the Square took on a semblance of feverish animation; but these tides were always swift to drain off into places of amusement, leaving the bewilderingly ingenious walls of advertising fire little to illuminate but this sedimental stuff, this sinister and turbid undercurrent of the city's life.

With all these aspects Tannehill was only

too intimate. This reach of Broadway had few secrets from him—if any.

It seemed odd to think that, not far from where he stood, he had found his first New York lodgings in a decent boarding-house, twenty years or so ago.

Things had changed a lot, Tannehill reflected obviously; town had changed a lot, he himself had changed a lot.

A grim smile softened his hard grey eyes: he was recalling a raw boy of the Middle West who had come to town fatuously determined to make his fortune with unexampled rapidity, that he might as speedily return and marry Myrtle Andrews.

The smile was blotted out by a wince of pain: the circuit had closed, linking up the memory of Myrtle Andrews with that haunting tune, the refrain of an old song, one that had enjoyed wide favour in its day, the day of Tannehill's innocence:

"Oh, the moonlight's bright to-night along the Wabash,
From the fields there comes a breath of new-mown hay,
In the sycamores the whip-poor-wills are calling,
On the banks of the Wabash, far away . . ."

Something like that. . .

The banks of the Wabash river had known the romance of Bob Tannehill's love for Myrtle Andrews, a love that was three parts adoration and the rest incoherent longing, and all so devoid of sex consciousness that the boy would have taken any such suggestion as approaching sacrilege.

Youth can be susceptible to passions as naïve. . . .

Coming from her home in Lima, Ohio, to visit kinsfolk in Terre Haute, Myrtle from the first day had Robert for her self-dedicated slave. Before the end of summer she took pity on the tongue-tied lad whose very soul was in eyes that never ceased to follow her. There were stolen meetings—stolen for no other reason than that, to lovers, secrecy is sweet—a little timid holding of hands, faltered declarations and vows, in the end a blundered and ineffective kiss, just one, as virginal as the heart of the girl, as guileless as the affection of the boy.

They parted with mutual promises, Myrtle to go home and wait, Robert to lay siege to New York. He persevered doggedly for a year or two, enheartened by letters which

suddenly, for no known reason, ceased. Robert wrote again and again without response, then made a trip to Lima, which resulted in nothing more comforting than the information that, following the failure and suicide of her father, Myrtle had left town with her mother for a destination unknown.

One of those incomprehensible mysteries which are so commonplace in life had swept Myrtle Andrews irretrievably out of the ken of Robert Tannehill.

When he dragged back to New York and his job, an ironic fate turned the favour of fortune to him full tide. In a span of years brief beyond belief, he prospered amazingly. Tannehill had the wit to know his limitations and buy brains of sounder judgment. To-day he had a manufacturing millinery business in its own building, a pretentious specialty shop under a French name in West Fifty-seventh Street, much money put by, and annual net profits from his enterprises equivalent to the income of half a million dollars.

He never thought of marriage, made few intimates, lived well enough in a popular hotel, where he rented a suite by the year,

cultivated a hobby for collecting rare colour prints which not only proved a source of unaffected private gratification but gave him flattering local prestige, dressed perhaps a shade too smartly, and had a mania for diamond rings. By way of public diversion he frequented the opera and the theatre on first nights. More or less furtively he ranged among women of the Margie sort, above which caste he never aspired; there was a place in his heart for the love of only one good woman—Myrtle Andrews.

Tannehill did not suspect this. Of late years the thought of Myrtle had faded into the background of consciousness, where it lingered, a gentle and yearning shade, a half-remembered dream of something exquisite that might have lifted life out of the rut of brute self-indulgence into a realm, dimly perceived, of spiritual beauty. Sometimes when he lay between waking and sleeping, the luxurious dark hush of his bedchamber would hear a sigh, long and shaken, a sound profoundly sad. But Tannehill seldom even wondered why he sighed.

And now again, in that windy, glaring

public place, he sighed with the forlorn accent of a tired child, and instantaneously his heavy lids drooped to mask desolate eyes.

When they lifted, his first glance comprehended the figure of a woman loitering on the far side of the entrance.

II

IMMEDIATELY Tannehill experienced a shock of emotion comparable to nothing less than a savage blow on his breast, producing a sensation of breathlessness accompanied by dull yet intensely irksome pain.

He was looking at the incarnation of his memory of Myrtle Andrews—slightly more mature, indeed; but otherwise, in every feature, in the poise of her head, in the pose of her body, Myrtle.

She stood with a shoulder to the wall, drooping in fatigue, her face to the street; a tall girl, fair, slenderly graceful and, at that distance, pretty in spite of a mutinous mouth and eyes. Her blue coat-and-skirt suit, two years' *démodé*, was patently of summer weight serge. A piece of worn moleskin, little larger than a man's handkerchief, clipped her throat; she carried a small,

shabby muff of the same fur. A short skirt revealed straight ankles in sleazy silk stockings. She wore low shoes, and needed new ones. Some freak of luck had endowed her with a showy beaded handbag. Tannehill saw that sheer will power controlled a tendency to shiver ; and while he watched, she coughed distressingly into her muff.

Becoming aware of his intent regard, she gave him a singular look of challenge and diffidence. In a seizure of shamefacedness, Tannehill hurriedly averted his eyes. The girl stared on for a bit, then wearily gave her attention again to the sidewalk parade.

Minutes passed before Tannehill could collect himself sufficiently to know what he must do and how to go about it. He required imperatively a closer look. If she turned out to be Myrtle. . . .

His thoughts lost coherence.

He began to wander idly round the lobby. The girl seemed to have forgotten him. In time he managed to get near enough to inspect her from a distance of not much more than six feet.

Beneath his breath Tannehill said fervently : " Thank God ! "

At short range her face discovered characteristic lines and contours utterly foreign to his memory of Myrtle, though it had its own sort of tragic loveliness, a haggard intimation of what might have been. . . .

Indescribably relieved, he went back to his former post. It had not yet entered his head that the girl was obviously less than twenty-five, whereas Myrtle, if alive, was approximately his own age.

Presently he glanced again at her and was once more, if in less degree, conscious of that shock of emotion. With the width of the lobby between them, the resemblance was incredibly true.

Without conscious volition Tannehill found himself openly approaching the girl. She looked round, startled, then submerged wonder in a poor assumption of effrontery.

" I suppose you're going to ask me if we haven't met somewhere before ? "

" No," said Tannehill briefly ; " it doesn't matter. Let's get a cab."

Without more ceremony he took her arm

and led her to the curb. A taxi swung in to his signal. Tannehill opened the door and bundled the girl inside.

"Where to, boss?" the driver prompted as he hung in hesitation.

"Oh, anywhere . . . the Blue Moon."

He stepped in and shut the door, and frustrated whatever impudence it was that fired her eyes and trembled on her lips with the direct question :

"What's your name?"

"Madge," she told him in astonishment—"Madge Mountstuart."

"I mean your real name."

"Have you got to know that, too, right off the bat?"

"Yes."

"None of your damn' business."

"All right."

Following a short pause, she said sullenly :
"Rose Sibley."

"Where do you come from?"

"My God!" cried the girl in a stare—"you go on like a reporter. . . . Syracuse, New York."

"Thanks," said Tannehill.

Syracuse is a far cry from Lima, Ohio . . .

The cab stopped. The door was opened by a porter with an undershot jaw. The two got out, the girl with a shiver darting hastily inside doors that admitted to a downward flight of steps covered with threadbare green carpet. Tannehill followed, to be staggered by a reek of food, cheap perfume, alcohol, and cigarette smoke. At the foot of the stairs he resigned hat, coat, and stick to a case-hardened spinster in cap and apron, and got a soiled cardboard check in exchange. The revelation of ornate evening clothes reduced to crass servility a head waiter whose habit was overbearing to the general. Evening dress that includes a white waistcoat and tie and tails to its coat is not precisely vogue at the Blue Moon. Tannehill had to be a shade decided in his rejection of a "reserved" table on the edge of the dancing floor.

"We'll sit over there by the wall," he insisted; "in the corner."

"But the cabaret——"

"Hang the cabaret. We want to eat and drink and talk."

Still nettled by his peremptory dismissal of her essays in impertinence, Rose Sibley eyed Tannehill askance while, seated beside her, he studied the bill of fare.

"Hungry?" he inquired without looking up. "I am."

"Starving," the girl admitted with a throaty laugh that failed in its intent to give truth the lie.

Bearing in mind that this place was not run for the purpose of selling food, Tannehill ordered in his best discretion, though liberally, stipulating a preferred vintage of champagne. The girl's eyes narrowed, then fastened in fascination on the impressive solitaire diamond ring that decorated his plump, white hand. From this her gaze lifted in wonder to his face with its bold jaw, firm mouth, and unillusioned eyes. Experience had taught her that men of his stamp were hard at a bargain. Why, then, this extravagance?

Was it possible that, at long last, her luck had turned?

The cynical antagonism of her attitude gave way to a laboured endeavour to make

herself agreeable. When cocktails were served, the girl took hers at a gulp ; Tannehill, after an experimental sip, let his glass stand. The babble let loose by the action of that atrocious concoction on an empty stomach he kept flowing by sympathetic if brief responses. In five minutes he learned all he needed to know about the woman, and precisely what he had expected : the common tale of unearned misfortune which, with insignificant variations, patience and toleration may hear a dozen, or at will a hundred, times in any single night of Broadway.

After a time the girl noticed that he kept his eyes from her face ; when he was not thoughtfully patterning the tablecloth with a fork, his interest seemed to be held by the spectacle of the dance floor with its milling mob, mainly recruited from that class which Tannehill had recognized as indigenous to the neighbourhood.

The floor was never empty ; for when the din of the jazz band was silenced and the dancers returned to their drinks, the open space was instantly invaded by purveyors of that degenerate vaudeville called the

cabaret. The walls mocked their vocal struggles, and under their antic feet the floor grumbled like a drum.

“Some show.”

“Is it?” Tannehill looked round blankly.
“I didn’t notice. I was thinking.”

As a matter of fact, he was not so much thinking as trying to compose his mind to thought, and finding it unruly to exasperation. Ordinarily his mental processes were clear and precise; just now they were strangely befogged and uncertain. He had as yet no glimmering of his intentions in respect of this woman, and no exertion of will seemed potent to focus his mind upon the question. He only knew that, as long as he refrained from looking at her, he sat by the side of Myrtle Andrews, enveloped in the golden glow of that old romance. . . .

He was unable to do more than disturb with knife and fork the ill-cooked food set before him. But to the girl it was a sybaritic feast. She ate like what she was, a famished creature, emptying glass after glass of the wine which Tannehill neglected. By the time she was satiate and enjoying a cigar-

ette, however, Tannehill had made up his mind.

"Where do we go from here?" Rose asked when he paid his bill and betrayed an inclination to leave.

Unwillingly Tannehill looked her in the face. She was flushed, exhilarated, primed. He needed that look to settle him in his purpose.

"What's your address?"

"To-night?" she asked pertly. "The same's yours."

He shook his head. "I'm taking you home."

"You can't," she protested in panic. "I've only got a hall room——"

"Never mind that," said Tannehill. "We'll fix things up to-morrow so you can be more comfortable. Meet me at Martin's for lunch, and we'll see about finding you a place of your own and—and some clothes. Meanwhile. . . ."

His hand moved along the wall seat. She looked down and caught her breath when she saw the denomination of the bank-note he pressed into her palm.

“ Now let’s get out of this,” he added, pushing the table away.

On his feet, he waited a moment, then looked down a shade testily.

“ Anything the matter ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t know,” she said vaguely, getting up. “ You’re sort of funny. . . .”

III

WHEN Tannehill went to meet Rose Sibley at Martin's, he had already signed a lease for a furnished apartment on Madison Avenue, not far from his hotel.

Some time before the hour appointed, standing in the restaurant bar and peering through a glass partition, he saw the woman enter and seat herself in the lounge: fear lest Tannehill had come to his senses betrayed in her unremitting watch on the revolving door, in the twitching of lips worried by her teeth, in the tense restraint of her body; for she lounged wholly without repose.

He had no wish to be unkind; nevertheless Tannehill would not show himself before the very stroke of the hour, but lingered, staring, feeding his hungry heart on the vision of his one love come back to him.

The woman had been at pains, with the help of his money, to better her appearance.

She was still shabby, but in great measure the slovenliness of the drab had already been abolished, her make-up had been applied with a hand less cynical, the hunted look in her eyes and the petulant set of her selfish mouth were alike somewhat dissembled. Tannehill remarked these signs of promise, but held them of no true consequence beside what really mattered: the confirmation of his overnight impression.

In this pitiless glare of day Rose Sibley resembled Myrtle Andrews even more than under artificial light.

His bosom swelled with such emotion as it had not known in many years.

At length he went to meet her, but avoided in as far as he was able any direct look into her face.

She rose in an affecting flutter of gladness. . . .

During the meal Tannehill inquired: "Musical, aren't you?"

"Crazy about music," she declared vivaciously. "When I lived home, I used to be at the piano all the time. I just loved it."

"Thought so. I noticed last night you have the spatulate fingers of a pianist."

"You see an awful lot," she commented obscurely, with a puzzled look.

That look, mirroring her mind, grew more strained before their luncheon came to an end. Tannehill said nothing of the arrangements he had made for her; and wisdom garnered of tribulation advised the girl that man dislikes being reminded of his covenants with women, preferring to be let alone to carry them out in his own way. Appreciating her tact, Tannehill told himself she was made of better stuff than Margie.

He was already quit of Margie, but her valediction rankled. The note and cheque sent by messenger she had acknowledged by telephone. Given adequate provocation, Margie could wield the vernacular as a mule driver wields a blacksnake whip. . . .

Only when introduced to the apartment itself did Rose begin to feel at all sure of her man. Still his reserve perplexed her, still she did not understand his distant courtesy, the aloofness of his regard.

Their tour of several rooms ending in the

studio, Tannehill went to a window and stood looking out.

“Well?” he asked. “What do you think——?”

“It’s perfectly damn’ splendid!” She had the laugh of a pleased child, then a pensive moment. “Only, I don’t see——”

“I know,” he interrupted. “But if it’s all the same to you, I’d as lief not talk about that. . . . Those boxes in the other room—they’re some things I had sent up from the shop. They ought to be about right. Anyhow, they’ll do to wear while you go out and buy to suit yourself.”

She departed hastily, and squealed delighted comments from the bedchamber as she opened box after box.

Tannehill waited in a trepidation unwarranted in the issue. When Rose appeared modishly transfigured from head to foot, she repaid well his trouble with the manifestation of her ability to carry clothes.

But only disappointment rewarded the one searching stare he gave her face. He did not look at it again that day.

“I don’t know how to thank you. . . .”

"There's only one way," Tannehill told her with some embarrassment. "Go on being as you are to-day. Don't change—don't ever try to change."

She marvelled at the passion that charged his tone, but his meaning she did not grasp at all.

"I'll try my level best to be whatever you want me to be," she said, and drew near to him.

Tannehill knew too well what was expected of him, what the situation demanded . . . what was impossible with him. He fumbled nervously for his watch.

"Must be going," he stammered; "late for an appointment as it is."

She followed to the door.

"When'll I see you again?"

"To-night—I'll drop in between eight and nine."

He left without other farewell. She shut the door and stood in deep thought, pinching her underlip.

"Well," she confessed at length, "it's got *me* buffaloed!"

When he called that night, he shook hands

formally, gossiped for a little on the news of the day, and presently suggested that she play for him.

“What ’ll I play?”

“Anything you like except ragtime. If you know any old songs . . .”

“The Banks of the Wabash” was forgotten before her time; but she ransacked her memory and found it tolerably stored with fragments of light opera. Tannehill switched off the wall sconces and retreated to the far end of the studio, where he lolled in a wing chair, smoking and watching the woman with eyes half closed. The illusion was complete: seated under the piano lamp, wearing a simple, almost a girlish gown he had selected with just this effect in mind, she was Myrtle Andrews tinkling away at a piano with much the same degree of amateur skill that Myrtle herself had demonstrated in that so-dead yesterday. . . .

“Tell me when you’ve had enough,” she suggested over her shoulder.

“No—I mean, go on, please.”

“But that’s about all I know—except ragtime.”

"Never mind." Tannehill got up. "I ought to be getting along anyhow—big day ahead of me to-morrow."

His visit had lasted little more than an hour.

Wondering, but still self-confident, Rose held his overcoat for him and, when it was on his back, let her hands linger lightly on his shoulders. Tannehill moved a little, in apparent inadvertence ridding himself of the sketchy embrace.

"Aren't you going to say good-night?" she asked with a plaintive note as he unfastened the door.

"Why, of course," said Tannehill, and held out a hand . . . looking back into the studio over her shoulder.

Before he knew what she was about, she carried the hand to her lips. He snatched it away almost violently.

"Don't!" he cried; "don't ever do that!"

"Why not? You're so kind, you've been a prince to me. . . . Won't you let me show my gratitude some way?"

"I can't explain," he muttered. "But that sort of thing. . . . Please don't do it

again—not if you want this arrangement to go on.”

It was too much for her patience. “Have it your own way,” she said tartly. “*Good-night, Mister Tannehill!*”

She sped his going with a gesture of exasperation. Miracles she was perfectly willing to stand for. To be as she was, sheltered in a handsomely furnished flat, wearing expensive clothes, well fed, with money in her pocket—well, remembering last night, this was unquestionably a sure-enough miracle.

But the rest was rank foolishness. . . .

I V

AFTER that Tannehill called almost nightly ; and the programme of their evenings ran into a groove from which it seldom departed.

Arriving a little after eight, Tannehill would be ushered into the studio by an individual of that tribe of insolent negro maids which seems to be bred solely for the uses of such establishments. Rose would be waiting for him, gowned in some exquisite creation which he had sent her from the shop. They would shake hands, Tannehill looking anywhere but into the puzzled eyes that continually sought his ; and after a few minutes of vague talk, an exchange of amenities almost laughably stilted and impersonal, Rose would go to the piano and play for him till he saw she was tired ; when Tannehill would begin to betray symptoms of restlessness and presently take himself off.

On rare occasions they would dine together at some favoured restaurant and "take in a show." But for these diversions the girl must inevitably have mutinied. Tannehill was sensible enough to humour her appetite for amusement; but, for his part, he was never happy away from the studio. Those two hours each night were to him all of life, all that made the tedium of his days endurable.

It cannot be said that he neglected his business—with men of his kidney due attention to business is as much a matter of routine as breathing—but it is true that one by one he eliminated all other interests, theatres and the opera, the society of acquaintances, sales of prints, "parties," the less savoury interludes. All these were emptiness by contrast with those hours during which he lounged and dreamed while the vision of his old sweetheart played to him, and in a mad commingling of past and present, reality and fantasy, the wonder and the beauty of his only love was recreated, and seeing her with his own eyes materially present, he communed with the spirit of Myrtle Andrews in a sympathetic intimacy sweet beyond all understanding.

In the heart of every man some deathless dream abides. To this man of middle age, hard headed, heavy handed, inured to adversity and disenchantment, his dream came true anew for a little part of every day, till insensibly it grew more true than truth itself, till the dream alone was real, the waking time illusion and a weariness.

Inevitably this confounding of the true with the false led to confusion of the flesh with the spirit. There were times when he was hardly able to discriminate between Myrtle and Rose, when only instinct, warning him that a single misstep must prove fatal, prevented his taking the woman for the vision.

To this Rose contributed with every wile at her command. She had all the common shrewdness of her kind, and in addition a memory of horrors to make her uncommonly ingenious. She was not going back if any art of hers could save her: this was the biggest thing her life had thus far known, far too big to risk losing through some false move or inadvertence. She set herself to study Tannehill with unremitting vigilance,

to make herself supple to his every whim, to create for herself a place in his life no other woman could ever hope to fill. And Tannehill was far from being unappreciative. As weeks went by, he watched her grow informed on subjects that interested him, remarked the care with which she cast out from her speech every vestige of the slang of Longacre Square ; and—what was disquieting—as the feeling of security grew strong in her and good living repaired the ravages of hardship and dissipation, he saw her tragic look fade out and the wasted face and body round into contours of troubling loveliness.

Daily she made him more acutely aware of her as a woman, till Tannehill had himself to fight as well as her unrelenting purpose.

He clung desperately to the memory of Myrtle. . . .

One afternoon Margie came to the studio for tea. Tannehill had no suspicion that an acquaintance existed between the two women. Rose never mentioned Margie. To do so would be to reveal the fact that, with too much time upon her idle hands, with all her days unoccupied and the nights

long when he had gone, Rose had taken to making little surreptitious excursions back along forbidden trails.

Longacre Square knew "Madge Mountstuart" had fallen on her feet, and welcomed the chance to fawn on her and, if opportunity offered, pick up some crumbs of her prosperity. Rose, renewing old ties, contracted new ones, among these a friendship with Margie. She was ignorant of Margie's former attachment for Tannehill, and nobody told her, either because the Square in general presumed she knew or because it wanted to see what would befall.

So Margie dropped in for tea—the kind that's brewed in a cocktail shaker.

"Pretty soft for you," she commented with just the right shade of envy, when she had been shown over the apartment and had inspected Rose's wardrobe. "He must be loony about you, dear. I never heard of any other girl getting half as much out of Bob Tannehill."

"I didn't know you knew him."

"Know him? My God, I guess 'most everybody knows Bob Tannehill!"

They treated themselves to more tea.

"How do you manage it?" Margie murmured, veiling her face in smoke.

As yet the tea had hardly had time to break down every barrier of caution and reserve in Rose; but she liked Margie, she was sorely perplexed by Tannehill, and she needed a confidante badly.

When she had finished, Margie was staring at her with eyes in which twin imps of malice lurked.

"Honest to Gawd?"

Rose nodded, smiling uncertainly.

According to her own widely bruited report, Margie, able to hold in no longer, gave a whoop and doubled up among the sofa cushions.

For several minutes she lay speechless, convulsed with the laughter of derision.

Then she sat up, dried her eyes, and "spilled" everything she knew.

She departed between spasms, and the echoes of her mirth poisoned whatever peace of mind Rose might have known between that hour and Tannehill's arrival in the evening.

He was unusually low-spirited that night, thanks to a wearing day, and hungry for

the solace of his hour. Rose received him in her happiest temper and prettiest frock, smothered his objections to having her near him with a host of small attentions which he could not well refuse, which he found in fact not displeasing, and when she had him settled entirely at his ease, played for him longer than was her custom and with more than the skill and sentiment he had learned to expect of her. Tannehill thought that Myrtle had never seemed more near to him and fond.

Before he knew she had left the piano, Rose was kneeling beside his chair, her strong young hands grasping his shoulders.

"Bob"—she could make her voice flute-sweet when she willed, and she so willed now—"I want an understanding with you."

"Why," he faltered uneasily—"what's the matter, Rose?"

"Things can't go on like this. You must know that."

He made an ineffective attempt to get up.

"It's pretty late. Can't we talk some other time——?"

"Please don't leave me just yet, Bob. I'm

lonely—the evenings are so long when you’ve gone. . . . Bob, don’t you ever stop to think what you’re doing to me? Is it right or kind to treat me like dirt under your feet? ”

“ Oh, come now, Rose——! ”

“ It’s true, and you know it. You’ve made me love you—Ah, yes, you have!—and now you—you won’t even let me touch your hand if you can help it.” Her voice was shaken. “ Bob, is it fair? . . . Look at me, dear! ”

Reluctantly he turned his face to hers. She had the trick of forcing tears at will. Her eyes were misted and tender, and her mouth quivered like a child’s.

“ Bob, am I so dreadful to look at? ” He shook his head. “ Then what is it? What is it? ”

He was dumb with consternation and a deeper emotion which he dared not name.

She experienced a flash of intuition almost blinding.

“ Bob, you never look at me, only from a distance. Why? Is it because you think you see somebody else in me, somebody you once really loved? Dear, don’t you know

we women have to learn to pretend? Why can't you make believe a little, too? Do you want to keep me always so unhappy?"

He was incapable of response. She drew him into her arms.

"Then, dear . . . pretend . . ."

Tannehill closed his eyes and found heaven on the lips of Myrtle Andrews.

V

THAT morning the telephone on the bedside stand shrilled till Tannehill, roused from heavy and dreamless slumbers, put the receiver to his ear, and said thickly :
“ Hello ? ”

The hotel switchboard operator answered :
“ Eight o’clock, Mr. Tannehill.”

Tannehill replied—“ All right ”—and hung up.

He lay for some minutes staring with sick eyes at the ceiling, in a dull effort of thought trying to concentrate on the memory of Myrtle. But her image in his mind was dim and tarnished.

He sighed and sat up on the side of the bed. His room was very dark and dismal. Without bothering to find his slippers, he padded to the windows and let up the shades.

A leaden daylight entered, cheerless and chill. Rain was coming down in sheaves out

of a grim, low sky. Tannehill stood for a while looking thoughtfully down into the gloomy cañon of the street with its shining black pavement and brimming gutters. The cold air eddied about his ankles, and presently he hitched his pyjamas about his waist and went to the bureau and for a while stopped there, contemplating the mirror's faithful presentment of a man turned forty, with heavy pouches under his tired eyes and a stubble of beard on his grey cheeks.

Quite clearly and irrefutably Tannehill perceived the death of his soul.

The telephone called again. He threw it a glance of annoyance, and pulled out one of the bureau drawers. At the back of it, under a heap of handkerchiefs, he found an automatic pistol. With this he returned to the bed and sat down.

He was aware of a lot of things he ought to adjust by hard thinking. . . .

But was it worth while ?

Deliberately he drew back the slide and let it snap forward again, projecting a cartridge into the chamber of the weapon.

The telephone persisted. Impatiently he

put the receiver to his ear and growled :
“ Hello ? ”

A voice he knew too well responded :
“ Thank you, Bob dear ! This is Rose.”

Without replying, Tannehill put the receiver down on the stand and stared at the pistol. It was a wicked thing to see. And his hand was singularly unsteady. He was shivering—or perhaps trembling.

He wondered. . . .

A thin shadow of a petulant voice escaped the telephone receiver.

He frowned and lifted the weapon uncertainly towards his head.

He heard an amazing noise, such as no living man had ever heard. The light of day winked out like a candle in the wind.

Unheard, the telephone gave an attenuated shriek. . . .



